

Waiting to be heard

How voices of the youth have been marginalised



NAHELA NOWSHIN

CONTRARY to popular belief, it's not entitlement or narcissism or laziness that defines millennials. If anything, it's probably a sense of disillusionment that's a defining characteristic of this generation.

This is definitely true for countless young Bangladeshis who feel trapped, voiceless and hopeless for a myriad reason. But, can you blame them? They have inherited a society and an economy shaped by preceding

generations that have let corporate greed run amok and facilitated the politicisation of fundamental institutions. Of course, there are things that we luckily didn't have to witness: horrors of large-scale wars and famines that generations before us have had to endure. But that doesn't mean we have been spared the ills of poor governance, a shrinking space for dissent, and the consequences of the absence of essential elements for a healthy, democratic society.

What is so ironic is that on the one hand, there is widespread acknowledgement of youth empowerment in political speeches, roundtable conferences and award ceremonies. But, on the other, the voices of the youth, when it comes to some of the most pressing national issues, are either missing,

suppressed or blatantly ignored. Despite these obstacles, it's the "spoiled" generation of "entitled" kids—as many would like to call them—who have courageously risen to the occasion time and again to protest all kinds of injustices. They are the ones who took it upon themselves, perhaps out of a sense of responsibility, to demand something as basic as road safety in the country. It was these same kids that protested against the school administration of Viqarunnisa in the aftermath of a student's suicide. This is the same generation of students who tirelessly continue to fight for space and their democratic rights in the country's premier public university.

How are we to believe that the voices of the youth really matter when their demands have simply gone unheeded? Our roads are not any safer. Children continue to be abused in educational institutions. And educational spaces remain in the grip of student wings of political parties. But despite these odds, the resilient youth haven't budged; they are still at the forefront of movements and protests demanding change.

A tendency to buy into comfortable myths has also led to the marginalisation of young voices. One of these myths is that young people are disinterested in politics—again, simply not true. This has only served to legitimise the lack of youth representation in the media and in policy decision-making. There are hordes of young people who are just as concerned about elections and refugee crises and the climate of investment as



seasoned politicians. So, why are their voices missing in op-ed columns and policy decision-making? (Although an increasing number of young people have begun to pen their thoughts in newspaper columns, it's not nearly enough, and an overwhelming proportion of writers belong to cohorts of bigger age groups.)

I can think of two reasons. One, they have learnt from past experience that their needs and concerns do not matter. It's the elites wielding political influence that will eventually overpower them. Combine that with a palpable sense of fear, it is no wonder that they choose silence over free expression.

Two, in a society where "wisdom and experience" are associated with those who are older and therefore wiser, the voices of the youth can easily be drowned out because their views and perceptions are not considered as credible. Also, there seems to be little effort to try and engage young people at the grassroots in public decision-making which means that national policies are being designed for them, not by them.

For more than a decade now, Bangladesh has been witnessing the emergence of a demographic dividend, i.e. more people of working age than non-working age, the so-called window of opportunity, which will

start to disappear by 2040. And there is no better time than now to make significant investments in human capital, especially in education and healthcare, if we are to utilise the potential of this large segment of young population and attain meaningful economic growth. Without adequate youth representation in policymaking, we risk leaving out the needs and demands of a large chunk of the population whose skills and intellectual development will undoubtedly decide the fate of the country in the coming decades. Frustration and hopelessness are already brewing among many faced with an economy of jobless growth, unable to find suitable employment, and among employers disillusioned with the low level of skills of candidates in the market. So, before stamping out the views and concerns of the twenty- and thirty-somethings from policy decisions, we should perhaps remember that it's the millions of young people who will be affected most.

All this rhetoric about youth empowerment will continue to ring hollow until and unless we make genuine attempts to give the youth a platform to voice themselves and to participate in conversations and policymaking. The fact that we have seen so many protests spring up lately, led by young people from all walks of life, isn't a good sign. It only points to the fact that there's simply no outlet for them to be heard because no one's listening.

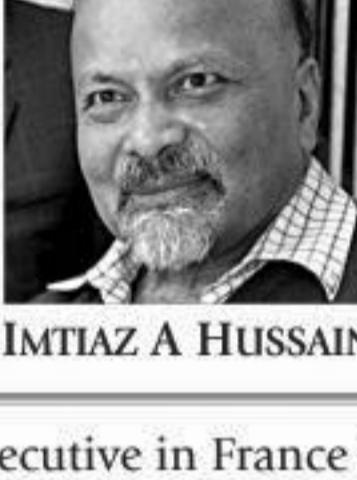
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'DEVIL'S ONLY FRIEND'?

Of fires, fates and fortunes



KAUTILYAN KRONICLES



FIRE," Don McLean wrote in "American Pie", "is the devil's only friend." It must have been so for Roman Emperor Nero: he anecdotally "fiddled while Rome burned" in 64 AD. His counterpart chief

executive in France today, President Emmanuel Macron, was far from fiddling when the Notre Dame Cathedral burned in Paris on April 16. Nero's hostility towards Christians (Rome's fire was allegedly triggered so Nero could watch them suffer), contrasts with the Christian reflection evoked by a threatened Notre Dame across a secular Europe today.

The fire was quelled within hours at Notre Dame, leaving Macron, who has promised France and Europe so much upon ascending his post, to make his boldest proposal yet: to rebuild the cathedral "even more beautifully," within five years. French philanthropists donated almost a billion dollars within a week (François-Henri Pinault, the Bettencourt-Meyers family, Henri Kravis), but only Macron playing his life's most crucial innings can salvage a tottering France.

France's 21st century has been problematic. Domestically, terrorist linkages with soiled suburbs, populism threatening democracy, and the ongoing middle-class yellow-vest protests destabilising Parisian streets, have all complicated governance. Externally, Brexit, transatlantic uncertainties, and yet another bid to become Europe's leader after Angela Merkel, impose huge tolls. Typically vivant, the French people now look worn, pessimistic, and precipitous.

In addition to uniting the French and unwittingly enhancing a Christian strain, the fire promoted a sense of nationalism and served as an instrument to rally, even identify, friends. For a start, it gives the endless yellow-vest movement a protracted pause. Macron, against whose neoliberal reforms it rallied, gets more time to somehow show some of his promised benefits. Although the April 12, 2019 Brexit deal deflected Great Britain's exit deadline to the end of October, the Notre Dame fire displaced Brexit from front-page



The Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris engulfed in flames.

PHOTO: BERTRAND GUAY/AFP

news (and media domination for weeks). Intertwining domestic and European dynamics is still central to any French revival.

France is famous for making long-term recoveries. Past recoveries were mostly battle-laced. Who would have thought that within only a handful of years from the 1789 French Revolution and the 1793-4 reign of terror that France would rule all of continental Europe, and as far east as Russia? Interestingly, Bonaparte's Waterloo defeat in June 1815 could not halt French greatness (not just militarily, but also in culture and literature, for instance). By the time another Napoleon emerged half a century later, Notre Dame's iconic spire was built as testimony to the country's elevated architectural taste and inherent desire to be noted, while Victor Hugo's 1830s *Hunchback of Notre Dame* masterpiece reiterated similar themes on the literary front. Defeat to Prussia in 1871 could not stop constructing another tell-tale structure, the Eiffel Tower in 1889 (no less for a "world" trade fair). Thirty-years later the 1919 Treaty of Versailles helped France

recuperate all that was lost in 1871, and then some. France's liberation from Adolf Hitler's forces could not but have a Notre Dame signature: the 1944 ceremony was as historical as the 800-year Gothic venue had become. We can be sure when cathedral reconstruction finishes, Macron might host the grandest Notre Dame ceremony ever.

By that time, Macron hopes to be the dominant European leader. He has not waited long in the wings to wish that outcome or grab that pre-eminent spot, but his ambition carries a typical French arrogance. That only comes from a citizen of a country dominating the continent longer than any other, on the battlefield, in diplomacy, and through language, cuisine, fashion, literature, and so on. The more one scrutinises his traits, the more one finds traces of France's.

Notre Dame's fire also carries continental parallels. How can one not reflect upon the bakery-oven London explosion in 1666 that reconfigured the city's landscape, making the shift from the bucolic to the cosmopolitan irreversible, just when the East India

Company had put Great Britain on the world-map (created, as the company was, in 1600)? London becoming the world's financial capital was, as if, meant to rival Notre Dame pushing Paris to be the same culturally.

Were it not for the February 1933 Reichstag (Parliament) fire, Adolf Hitler's trajectory might have been short-circuited. He used the event, through the Fire Act, to clamp down on many freedoms, thus cornering people he did not like, such as communists and Jews. France was among his earliest victims. The rest was history, one so sick it is worth repelling. Never since has it been more urgent to keep in Europe's rear-view mirror than today.

More comparable to the Notre Dame stature was the November 1992 fire at Windsor Castle. Material losses were heavy and costs high, but the edifice survived, as too the dynasty. Since then the British monarchy has been on a roll, getting more popular each and every day. Whether this is a function of the graceful aging of its longest-serving monarchy, or the fairy-tale marriages of her two grandsons (and possible heirs),

one does not know for sure, but Macron has a model to ruminate as he wades his way out of the too many uncharted waters his country is in.

In partial amendment, one must say the highest price paid for European fires, and the flock that has lost more lives than the "who's who" list, has been farmers and country-dwellers, who faced even more ravaging encounters, almost every summer. Three of the deadliest wildfires across Europe have been in this century (compiled by the International Association of Fire and Rescue Services): Portugal (2017), for 5 days, with 64 fatalities; Russia (2015), killing 34 people and hundreds of animals; and Greece (2007), with 77 victims. It would be fitting to compare the press coverage of all three against Notre Dame's. Why, this one fire may have elicited more reports than all the fires annually across Europe, nowadays nearing the 80,000 mark.

Pushing the point, though Notre Dame got all that it deserved after the fire, from worldwide attention to a quick-fire billion for the monumental recovery, barely anyone even blinks at the more continuously tragic fires in Palestine from actions taken against them, or the hundreds of thousands of children barely surviving in displaced homes or refugee camps across Bangladesh, in and around Syria, and Yemen. When one injured fireman at Notre Dame gets more newspaper fame than any victim in any of these locations, "no angel born in Hell," as per McLean, can "break that Satan's spell."

Parisian philanthropists dished out millions overnight for a noble Notre Dame cause. Posterity will benefit from their interventions. Yet, only when charity will know no boundaries (class, cultural, national), that is, philanthropists outside of France helping the Notre Dame cause just as French philanthropists helping those outside, will benefits such as these multiply to where they need to be. Since Christianity preaches that, and humans have always been stirred by it, the message to take from Notre Dame is that the day reality is universally interpreted in the same way is never too far away. When that happens, fires, fates, and fortunes will cease to be the devil's best friends.

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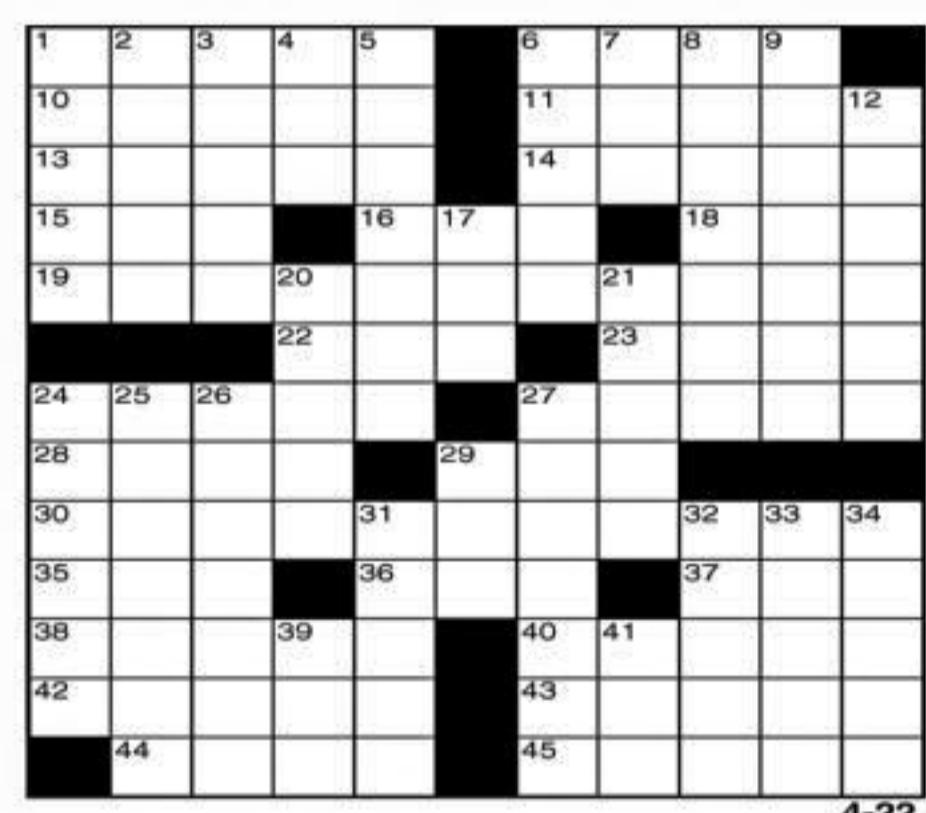
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AMERICAN ICE HOCKEY
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Risk something or
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your dreams.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	breakfast	7 Punk rock offshoot
1 Solemn ceremonies	36 Rent out	8 Cite
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10 Like argon	38 Baby grand, for example	12 Unmanned planes
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14 Ping producer	43 Make blank	21 Online message
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23 Had on		32 Des Moines native
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30 Leaving of a job		
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4	5 Bee part	27
5	6 One of the Obama daughters	31
6	30 Leaving of a job	36
7	35 Bed-and-	39
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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