

We have been spared the worst

But there are lessons to take away from 'Fani'

THANK Providence we came out relatively unscathed from cyclone "Fani". However, there have been some losses of life and breaches in embankments in several regions in the coastal areas causing inundation. By the time it hit us, Fani had weakened from a severe cyclone into a tropical storm. And till going to press, we have a figure of 12 dead and around 70 injured.

The administration deserves compliments for the good advance work to mitigate the consequences. The fact that 16 lakh people were moved to storm shelters is a remarkable work. Although it is a great relief that we have come away lightly from Fani, we believe that there are some essential lessons that we should derive from this cyclone in order to obviate the likelihood of loss of life and property in future.

We believe that our attempts in future should be to implement a zero-death policy. The 12 lives lost is 12 too many, we feel, given that Bangladesh has a good record of tackling natural calamities, particularly cyclones, and for many countries we have become an example in this regard.

Thus, there is a need to assess why, given the good preparatory actions of the government and mastering of about 50 thousand volunteers this time also, lives were lost—and why some people were reluctant to move to the shelters till the very last moment, and why the embankments in certain places gave away. The number of storm shelters and their current condition need to be assessed too. All loopholes that may exist in implementing the evacuation and safety plans effectively, before and during a cyclone, should be effectively plugged.

Is Shahadat's case a repetition of Limon's ordeal?

Too many loopholes in police's version

WE are dismayed and disappointed that a twenty-year-old man has been shot in the leg and then arrested by police personnel for reasons that cannot be described as credible. According to our correspondent, Shahadat Hossain, the unfortunate young man who happened to be crossing a police checkpoint while on a bike, was apprehended and then shot in the leg. According to Shahadat, the police had admitted to him that they had shot him by mistake and apologised for it, even going as far as taking him to a hospital and spending Tk 7,000 for his treatment. But mysteriously, three days later, the same police accused Shahadat in a case of preventing police from discharging their duty. These two bizarrely contrasting versions of the story leave us quite baffled as to what really happened.

If indeed Shahadat had been obstructing the police personnel and therefore had to be shot in the leg to be restrained, why would the police file a case against him three days later? And why would they admit him to a hospital, pay for his treatment instead of arresting him, and then going through official channels to get him treated? Surely the police have a lot of explaining to do.

Meanwhile, a young man's fate hangs in the balance. He does not know whether he will be able to regain full use of his leg. Neither does he know how the "case" against him will pan out.

We cannot help but find an eerie similarity between this case and that of Limon Hossain, a teenager who was shot in the leg by a member of Rab who had mistaken him for a criminal. Limon was left bleeding and eventually lost his leg and was lumped with two false cases—one for possessing arms and another for obstructing law enforcers.

We sincerely hope that Shahadat's story is not a repetition of Limon's. The case must be properly investigated and the police must provide a credible and satisfactory account of this incident. Such police excesses must be dealt with a heavy hand.

Reducing the environmental impact of RMG industry



MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

ON April 22, people in countries across the world took part in a global day of political and civic action for World Earth Day, an annual event dedicated to environmental protection, first celebrated in 1970. While much of the news around World Earth Day had a Western bias, with a focus on demonstrations and marches in the likes of London, Paris and New York, this day of environmental awareness-raising activities is of huge relevance to countries such as Bangladesh. In fact, it is arguably of more relevance to Bangladesh, and other parts of Asia, than the rest of the world as environmental challenges and the impact of climate change are more pressing issues here.

With the messages of this day still fresh in our mind and as we brace for the aftereffects of cyclone Fani, which hit Bangladesh yesterday, perhaps it is an appropriate time to consider environmental and climate challenges for Bangladesh—particularly the interaction between industry and the environment—and also to consider why we all need to begin thinking much more carefully about how we use the earth's precious resources.

The first thing to note in this context is that Bangladesh, like many other Asian countries, is particularly vulnerable to climate change. Extreme weather events have already caused chaos in the country and led to shifts in migration and poverty patterns.

For instance, in 2017, 6.8 million people in north-western Bangladesh found their land and crops drowned under flood water. The totally submerged land constituted over 16,000 hectares, while another 560,000 hectares of crops were partially damaged. Meanwhile, in April the same year, floods damaged around 220,000 hectares of ready-to-be harvested crops, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Official estimates suggest that in



PHOTO: THEASIAFOUNDATION/BGMEA

Simple changes to production techniques aimed at improving efficiencies can yield financial returns in the form of reduced water, electricity and chemical use.

2017 alone, the floods severely affected the livelihoods of at least eight million people in Bangladesh.

There is a human cost and a business cost here—and clearly, the two are intertwined. For three years in a row, the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report has identified climate change as the gravest threat for global business and industry. The report notes that "failure in climate change mitigation and adaptation—water crises—natural disasters" will impact business and industry worldwide.

Ready-made garment (RMG) production, which constitutes the largest industry in Bangladesh in terms of contribution to gross domestic product, is a resource-hungry and pollution-intensive sector. And it is an industry that will have to keep an increasingly close eye on its environmental impact moving forward.

It is well-known that washing, dyeing, and finishing of textiles require large amounts of clean freshwater, and can

range from under 100 to more than 300 cubic metres per tonne of textiles, according to World Bank data. Assuming an annual textile production of five million tonnes, it is estimated that an average factory in Bangladesh consumes 300 litres of water per day. Replicate this water usage across the many thousands of RMG factories in Bangladesh, and the scale of water use becomes clear. Consider, also, that most of this water is sourced from groundwater wells.

The total water usage by the textile industry in Bangladesh is estimated to be 1,500 million cubic metres, which is principally made of groundwater. Around 70 percent of this water consumption is estimated to take place in wet processing of textiles, which involves the washing, dyeing, and finishing of textiles.

Though the growth of green garments in Bangladesh in recent times has been commendable—82 garment factories in the country have been LEED-certified by the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) and 320 more factories

have registered for LEED certification, which is the highest in the world—the textile industry still faces the challenge of dealing with the problem of effluent discharge and the use of coagulants and chemicals for its treatment. This poses a huge problem for the industry, particularly for small- and medium-sized units which do not always have the cash to invest in the latest effluent treatment technology.

The government and the industry need to respond accordingly. On the one hand, they need to make water conservation a priority, and on the other, they need to ensure that the industry is treating and disposing of this water in the correct manner. These twin challenges will be critical for the RMG industry, and the environment, moving forward.

It is agreed within the industry that water conservation and rainwater harvesting can be better promoted across the industry, and many RMG operators are already going in this direction. They are investing in modern technology, which includes processing equipment that makes more efficient use of water and also better treatment technology, including high-tech wastewater treatment equipment. The industry is certainly going in the right direction, but more support is needed from the government and also the international buyers, which are heavily dependent on our industry.

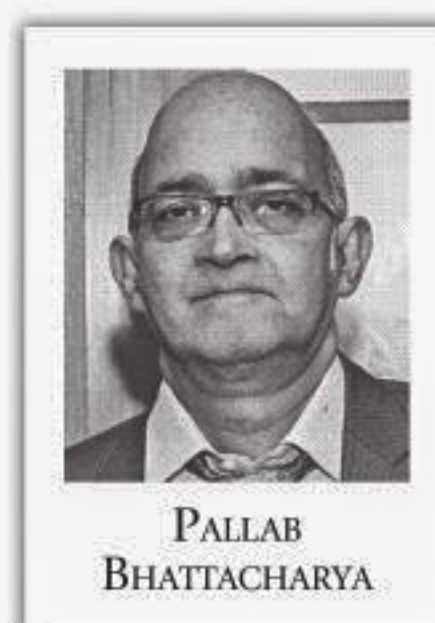
It is also worth considering that saving water and other input resources actually makes economic sense in the long run. It is well-documented that simple changes to production techniques aimed at improving efficiencies can yield financial returns in the form of reduced water, electricity and chemical use. The return on these investments can be quick—often just one or two years.

Regardless, these are investments all businesses in our industry need to be addressing as a matter of urgency, for the sake of their long-term well-being, and for the sake of our country and the planet.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE). He can be reached at mostafiz@denimexpert.com.

INDIAN GENERAL ELECTION

Emerging trends as Indian election approaches end



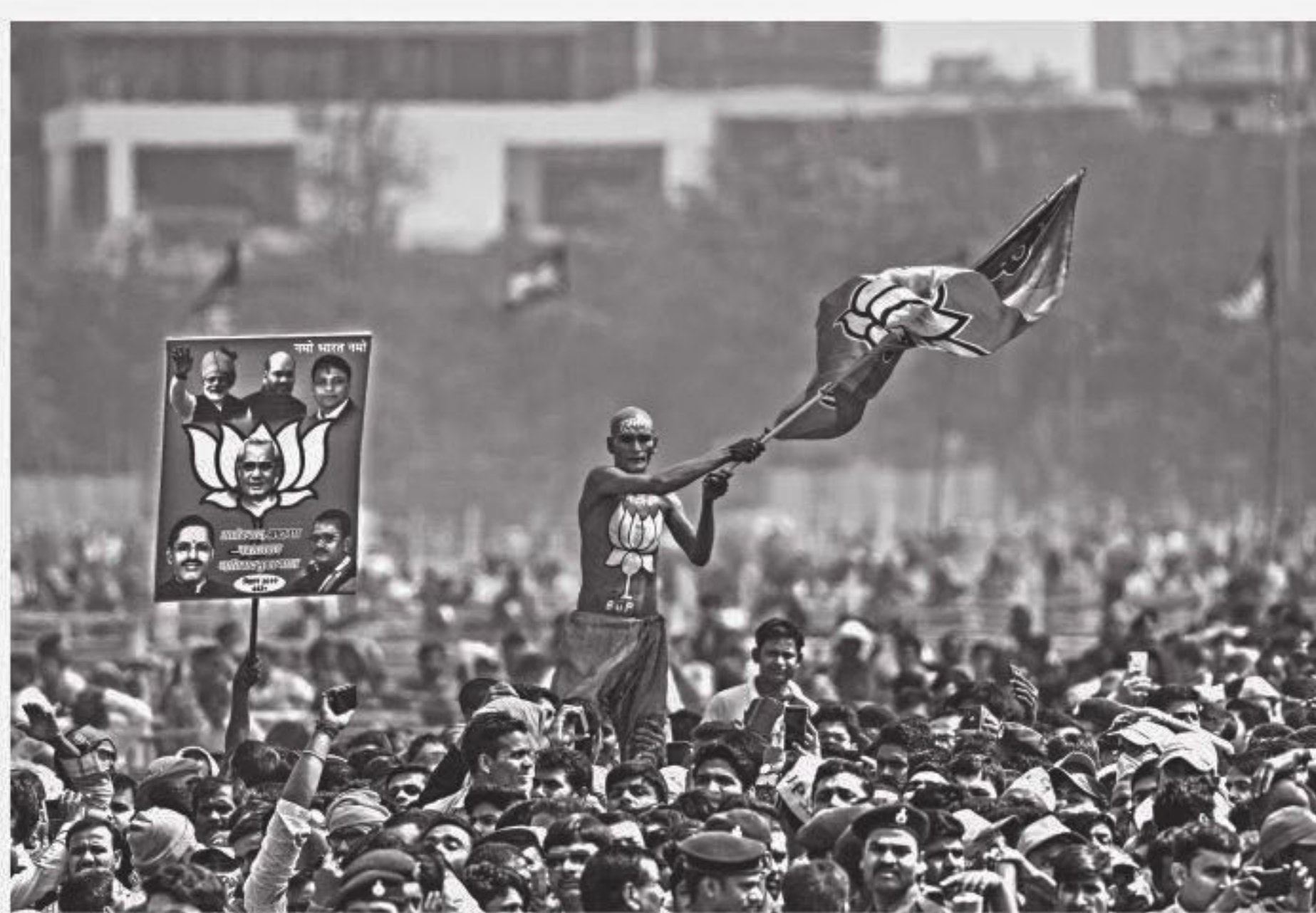
PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

POLLING in 70 percent of the total of 543 seats in India's parliamentary election is over. After polling began on April 11, voters have chosen their representatives for 373 constituencies in four phases.

The voting in the remaining seats will be held in the next three phases between May 6 and 19. Even though results will be out only on May 23, every Indian home, tea stall, restaurant and hotel besides the political circles are abuzz with discussions and speculations as to how the main political parties have fared so far, breaking down their analyses phase-wise, region-wise and even constituency-wise. The voter turnout in the four phases of the election has largely remained near that of the previous national polls (66.44 percent) five years ago, with just a little variation.

The first phase of polling set the tone and momentum for the subsequent phases and that is why political parties had anxiously waited for the feedback on the voters' mood that had prevailed on April 11. What the parties wanted most was to find out what were the issues that had captured the imagination of the voters and to what extent. The subsequent phases of polling were mainly about either building on or losing that momentum. In a country of India's size and with its hugely complex web of castes, religions and a myriad of issues, predicting the outcome is fraught with risks. All the same, there is a general agreement on certain broad trends that have emerged.

One, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has loomed large over the electoral scenario in a manner not seen since the time of Indira Gandhi. The Bharatiya Janata Party is entirely relying on Modi's personal image of an honest and decisive leader and his communication skills to overcome the anti-incumbency challenge which in many cases becomes a double burden due to the party being in power in several states. It is true that farm sector crisis, lack of adequate number of jobs and the economic disruptions caused by demonetisation and introduction of a countrywide, uniform Goods and Services Tax are bedevilling the ruling party. Besides, there is resentment against many BJP lawmakers in terms of development work in their



A supporter of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) waves a flag during a speech by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Patna on March 3.

PHOTO: AFP/GETTYIMAGES

constituencies. The party has sensed this and did not give re-nomination to many of its sitting lawmakers, particularly in tribal areas, in a bid to soften up the voters' disenchantment.

If reports coming in from the hinterland, including villages and small towns, are anything to go by, although people are unhappy with the BJP government's report card and their lawmakers' failings at the local level in terms of development and livelihood issues, they appear to back Modi and are still looking up to him to turn things around for the better. One common refrain is that there is not a single political party which fulfils all its electoral promises, and so Modi alone cannot be faulted for not delivering on several promises in the last five years. But can Modi's popularity blunt anti-incumbency and to what extent? Can the Modi factor help his party overcome cumulative discontent in constituencies? If it can't, then the BJP could be in real trouble. If anti-incumbency trumps the BJP's national security campaign narrative, the saffron party has reasons to worry.

Then there are some other imponderables the BJP has to face. One is the presence of powerful regional parties which cannot be just wished away—Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party-Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh, Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar, Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra, Dravida

Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu and Janata Dal (S) in Karnataka. A major challenge the BJP faces in UP is the potential of the social combination presented by SP, BSP and RLD by seeking to unite Jatavs (the caste to which BSP chief Mayawati belongs), Yadavs (the caste of SP leader Akhilesh Yadav) and Jats (represented by RLD chief Ajit Singh) despite animosities among themselves.

The states mentioned above together have 270 Lok Sabha seats. In the 2014 national polls in UP and the state assembly polls there in 2014, the BJP swept most of the states riding on a consolidation of Hindu votes cutting across caste divides following the communal riots in Muzaffarnagar in 2013. But that kind of wave is missing this time around and the BJP may find it difficult to counter the SP-BSP-RLD combine. Of course, the SP-BSP-RLD combine's success will depend largely on their ability to transfer their respective traditional vote banks—Yadavs, Dalits, Muslims and Jats, respectively. But that does not mean Jatavs, Jats and Yadavs would back the BJP.

The biggest challenge to the BJP's comeback to power with a clear majority (272 seats) in the 543-member Lok Sabha is how to make up for the steep shortfall in seats it is likely to face not only in Uttar Pradesh, which sends the largest number of Lok Sabha lawmakers (80), but also in nearby Hindi-speaking heartland states Rajasthan, Madhya

Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, after having reached the saturation point by winning almost all the seats five years ago. The real challenge for the BJP in these states is not so much to hold on to its dominance but to minimise the losses, because the Congress is going all out to not allow any slackening of the momentum it got in the heartland states by winning assembly polls there less than six months ago.

The party needs to win seats in new grounds like West Bengal, Odisha, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Assam and the five southern states: Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Barring Karnataka, the other four southern states could prove to be a slippery path for the BJP because it has very little presence in them, and in Tamil Nadu it has tied up with the anti-incumbency-affiliated and factional feud-ridden AIADMK. By all accounts, the DMK looks certain to walk away with most of Tamil Nadu's 39 seats, the fifth highest after UP, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Bihar.

The saffron party's hopes of cashing in on the 25 seats in the North East have run into complications due to its stand on Citizenship Amendment Bill. Assuming the BJP does make gains in West Bengal, Odisha and the North East, the question is, will it be enough to cover the loss of seats it may suffer in the other big states?

On the other hand, the Congress can look forward to gains in Kerala, Karnataka and the three heartland states. It also hopes that its Tamil Nadu ally DMK sweeps the state and thwart the BJP and its partner AIADMK. But reports signal that the Congress may not be able to gain as much from the momentum of its victory in the heartland states as it wanted to, because of the tardy implementation of the party's farm loan waiver promise which propelled it to power there in December. The Congress too has run up against regional parties like Trinamool Congress, BJD, TDP and YSR Congress and Telangana Rashtra Samithi.

Keeping all the above-mentioned trends in mind, the BJP faces another stern test when polling is held in the remaining three phases on May 6, 13 and 19. The party cannot afford to lose many seats in these phases, which will cover 170 seats. Even a small fall in seats in these phases could make the BJP heavily dependent on its alliance partners. And if the loss is bigger for the BJP, it could make the race for power wide open.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent at The Daily Star.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Fani: the wrath of nature

As we sit in our warm, cosy abodes, thinking about some hot beverage that would go perfectly with the weather, the coastal regions of Bangladesh are grappling with Fani, one of the most colossal cyclonic storms to have been brewed in the Bay of Bengal. So far, it has claimed 14 lives from our very own land.

While our neighbouring country had to bear the brunt of this wrath of nature, Fani's intensity diminished miraculously as it moved inland. Despite bracing ourselves with support from all stakeholders, lives were lost and such a day is always an occasion of mourning regardless of the margin of death tolls. Having said so, the damage could have been much more catastrophic given the sheer magnitude of the storm. The week-long preparations taken by the government entities leading up to the strike were noteworthy. More than 50,000 volunteers had been alerted near the coastal areas and all kinds of arrangements pertaining to food, clothing and shelter had been made to tackle this.

We still have a long way to go in terms of securing lives, and with India being susceptible to more looming cyclonic disasters till December, we should be equipped to combat and win against such calamities.

Iqra L Qamari, By email