

# The inextricable link between water scarcity and poverty

ISMAIL ALI

WHEN I was visiting a museum in Athens last year, one of my Greek friends was explaining to me about an ancient water supply canal that went through underneath the museum. It was amazing to see that the authorities in Athens realised the importance of providing clean water for its newly urbanised citizens, even thousands of years ago.

Sadly, in the 21st century, 1,400 children under five die every day from diseases (such as diarrhea) linked to lack of safe water and inadequate sanitation according to Unicef, at a time when the world is richer, technology is better, and knowledge is ever-expanding. It appears that the governments, especially in South Asia and Africa, either do not understand the deep correlation between water and human wellbeing or simply do not care about those who are primarily affected—the voiceless poor.

The close connection between water scarcity and poverty is made clear in both the United Nations' Human Development Report 2006 and the Millennium Declaration 2000. It is essential for human survival but currently over two billion people live in countries experiencing high water stress, and about four billion people experience severe water scarcity during at least one month of the year (UN 2019).

Although the UN Water Development Report 2019 recognises safe drinking water and sanitation as basic human rights, as they are indispensable to sustaining healthy livelihoods and are fundamental in maintaining the dignity of all human beings, across South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa water scarcity is forcing young girls to drop out of school in large numbers. Traditionally, in these societies, it is women's responsibility to walk miles just to fetch clean water for their families. Meanwhile, inadequate and

unequal access to water is both a result and a cause of poverty. The economic development that so many people need to climb out of poverty remains stagnant without the availability of water. With rapid population growth and increased industrial demand, water withdrawals have tripled over the last 50 years and are likely to continue, making billions vulnerable to food security and economic activities.

Water scarcity hits the poorest the hardest. They pay a poverty premium, directly and indirectly, to meet their water needs. A wealthy Warden Road (Mumbai) or Gulshan (Dhaka) resident has guaranteed availability of freshwater while the poor living in the nearest slum of Dharavi in Mumbai or Korail in Dhaka not only struggle to find appropriate source of quality water but also pay more compared to the well-off. Eminent business thinker CK Prahalad, an expert in the field, exclusively illustrates this in his book *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*.

According to the UN Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) 2019, Bangladesh has made significant strides in poverty reduction and urges all developing countries to follow Bangladesh's footsteps. In a brilliantly edited book *Poverty and Water*, Haakon Lein writes about Bangladesh in the chapter titled "Water, agricultural development and rural poverty in Bangladesh." He finds that during the 1990s, Bangladesh achieved substantial economic growth and made significant progress in poverty reduction. There may be many explanations and one of them is related to agriculture.

Lein argues, along with other issues in agriculture, the single most important factor has been water, or, more precisely, the fact that Bangladeshi farmers have been relatively successful in gaining control over water resources found in this delta. Agricultural growth has been driven by the expansion of dry season irrigation based on privately



A wealthy Gulshan resident has guaranteed availability of freshwater while the poor living in slums not only struggle to find appropriate source of quality water but also pay more compared to the well-off.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

owned tube wells and pumps, combined with the spread of new high-yielding rice varieties, he goes on to say.

However, 24.2 million Bangladeshis are still undernourished, meaning one in six don't get enough to eat, and the benefits of economic growth have been distributed unevenly across the country.

When I was visiting my hometown in Sunamganj last year, some farmers told me their accounts of how water is making their families poorer. For example, they cannot irrigate their croplands during the dry season for lack of water and due to floods during the monsoon, as heavy rains wash away their

crops. At my request, some local government officials investigated the area, and explained to us the complexities, including government discouragement for private solutions that Lein had pointed out.

Water scarcity may endanger democracy and the state of human rights in India, according to the recently published UN Human Rights Report. It observes, 400 million people in India will have no clean drinking water by 2030. There will be mass migration to the already overpopulated and under-resourced cities; more people will compete for fewer resources; and food prices will go up. In the face of desperation, rule of

law might not survive, which will have global implications, the report added, giving India's government five years to act.

For water-stressed countries, it is not necessarily about physical lack of water available for human use. Africa faces huge problems in securing sufficient clean water for all, but physically, the continent has more water available per capita than Europe. Even Cherrapunji in India, the wettest place on earth, suffers from recurrent water shortages. And bad policies are one of the main contributing factors.

Apart from water-poverty correlations, water will acquire the same strategic significance in the 21st century as oil did in the past century and will therefore play a crucial role in future geo-political relations. The prospect of "water wars" is increasingly becoming likely: the number of water-related conflicts reported worldwide has risen sharply in the past 15 years, according to the Pacific Institute, a water research group.

Every country surrounded by mighty rivers such as the Nile, Mekong, Jordan Valley or Brahmaputra—vital sources of water for billions of people—are at risk of conflict. In his book *Water: Asia's New Battleground*, Brahma Chellaney argues, "Water scarcity is Asia's defining crisis of the 21st century." Water has emerged as a critical issue that will determine whether Asia is headed towards greater cooperation or greater competition as it has the world's largest number of people without basic or adequate access to water with the lowest per-capita availability of all the continents.

It would be very unwise if the international community ignores this pressing issue concerning the most basic element of human survival.

Ismail Ali is a London-based columnist specialising in development issues.

## A deep dive into America's latest nosedive President Trump vs congresswomen of colour



RAMISA ROB

FOUR years ago, when I stepped onto American soil for college, I quickly learned, somewhere in small talk, the rhetorical question "Where are you originally from?" and the phrase "Go back to your country" were vintage stocks of an evil market called racism. At that time, these words coming out of the president's mouth would exemplify a bad joke, because it was unimaginable, unrealistic. Ever since, many things have changed, including the commander-in-chief.

Maybe it's more accurate to say US politics took a nosedive into that once incomprehensible joke, verbatim, recently. The 45th president tweeted, "Why don't they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came," referring to four congresswomen of colour, elected in midterms 2018.

Speaking with passion and empathy for the working class, these four congresswomen, now referred to as the "squad," include: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, the youngest woman ever elected to the House of Representatives, a newcomer who beat a 10-year incumbent after working as a bartender the year prior; 45-year-old Ayanna Pressley, the first Black congresswoman to represent Massachusetts; and the first two Muslim women elected in congress, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, also a former refugee, and Palestinian-American Rep. Rashida Tlaib from

Michigan. Needless to say, they're all US citizens, and, therefore, Americans: three of them born and raised in the US, and Omar, a naturalised citizen for a higher number of years than the current First Lady. Each of their success stories to top positions echoes the empowerment in overcoming hardship, and gleans reassurance that nothing is impossible if you work hard enough, that the American dream is accessible to even those with

to his science denialism, and so on. Donald Trump's nightmare though comes from the power of Congress to impeach him. That plausibly hits the buttons to bring out his raw colours, evident not only in his feral tweets, but also in his recent rally in North Carolina, wherein he demonised Ilhan Omar (his favourite target) and set the stage for depraved chants from the rabid audience: "Send her back, send her back."

But didn't we already know Donald

that they're multiracial minorities in his political regime that reaps profits from the fear of immigrants and vows to keep them out. Their candid outspokenness coupled with non-European heritage makes them perfect recipients not only of racism in US politics, but also the ploys of retaining power. These four women have occasionally been scornful of moderate Democrats, such as the pragmatic Speaker Pelosi, which means Republicans can capitalise on their differences and divide Democrats.

The quartet's progressivism is less about politics, and more about human values (probably as it would be in a perfect world). They're persistent in pushing the Green New Deal and Medicare for all to save the planet, future children, especially underprivileged ones. The Republicans' objective is to vilify these social justice acts by labelling the actors as degenerate socialist Democrats, anti-Semites, the standing enemies who want to "model America's economy after Venezuela" (as Donald Trump stated in his op-ed in *USA Today* in October last year).

By plastering this narrative of the foursome on the entire Democratic Party today, the Republicans' aim is to accumulate votes of moderates by creating that familiar "lesser of two evils" situation. Or rather, result in low turn-ups for the Democrats in 2020, which worked in Trump's favour in the last election. For context, the white, evangelical,

uneducated base will still vouch for him anyway, but he didn't win 2016 only because more people voted for him, but also because Democratic voters, especially Bernie supporters, commonly Leftists, antagonised Clinton with their absence at ballots.

So now, journalists find themselves in over-calculating conundrums, debating whether this latest massacre of words reflects a shrewd strategy for an upward trajectory, or the catalyst for Donald Trump's demise in 2020. But in making everything about the forthcoming election, we continue to trivialise the violations of behavioural standards mandating the politics of greed and the thirst for power. The president's transition from dog-whistles to explicit bigotry—for which people all over the country, including those in top positions, get fired—signifies a historic moment of validating birtherism, and the racist entitlement to demand legal citizens of colour be sent back to where they emigrated from, when they don't agree with the head of state. It's a desire to silence women of colour, the opposite of the very universality that makes America unique.

The fact of the matter is that, the duly elected congresswomen's subjection to unforgiving scrutiny by the White House is rooted in their unapologetic criticism of the president, GOP's policies, and lobby powers of Israel. The latter has been subverted by Republican media to mean "anti-Semitism," although Bernie Sanders, of Jewish faith

himself, has repeatedly said, "It's not anti-Semitic to be critical of a right-wing party in Israel." Similarly, being critical of a right-wing US government shouldn't mean one is anti-American.

Later in the speech in North Carolina, Donald Trump mentioned how very rich, powerful men who once called him "Don" now call him "Mr President," because "people have such respect for the office of the president—they have respect for our country again! Our country is respected again." These anecdotes, to me, rumble a sinister sentiment: those who disagree are those who hate, and those who support the Trump administration, by extension, respect America. All the boundaries between patriotism, nationalism and narcissism officially blurred. What that means is that dissent and diversity—signature American values (refer to the Declaration of Independence)—face the threat of extinction.

While four Republicans have renounced their president's racist statement, for a group who dissented from President Obama for eight years on end, the ghastly silence among the rest to eschew rebuke now, and the concurrence of some that women of colour are in fact "anti-American" for differing viewpoints, is totally unjustifiable, considering even the murky nature of power politics.

It's worrisome, to say the least.

Ramisa Rob is a master's candidate in New York University.



US Representatives Ayanna Pressley, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez hold a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington DC on July 15, 2019.

PHOTO: ERIN SCOTT/REUTERS

limited opportunities.

But their fresh faces mirror much more than telegenic symbols of American pluralism. They're vigorous personalities with strident opinions on human rights violations, while proffering definitive policy proposals in stark contrast to Chief Trump. For example, they're pro-immigration against his wall-like jingoistic vision, climate change advocates opposed

Trump equates whiteness with American citizenship? Remember his battery of false claims that Barack Obama was born in Kenya? Trump's 2016 election strategies were moored all over in divisiveness, clumsily designed to alienate minorities and arouse hatred for diversity. So, the reason why he thwarts these particular women is grounded in the realms of gender bias, mixed with the fact

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