

# What does it take for a tree to fall?

## The burning problem of the Amazon



**I**f a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it really fall? If another tree follows it, and then another, followed by a million others, and no one is around to hear the sound of their fall, do they really fall?

The Amazon has been burning for more than three weeks now, and only recently has it been able to secure its fair share of airtime. In fact, the Amazon has been burning since January at a rate unprecedented in its recent history—it has been estimated that there have been around 73,000 instances of fire in the Amazon since the beginning of the year, a more than 80 percent increase compared to the corresponding period of last year.

Over 750,000 square kilometres of the Amazon rainforest, spread across eight countries (Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Columbia, Venezuela, Surinam, French Guiana and Guyana), have been lost since 1978, thanks to deforestation. 750,000 square kilometres is more than five times the size of Bangladesh. Every year, we lose a part of the Amazon, traditionally to agriculture and farming, and now to industrial activities and large-scale agriculture and cattle farming. Yet, it took us Sao Paulo's doomsday photos to take notice of it.

One might wonder though, why have the fires been so rampant this year. Since January, more than 1,330 square miles of the Amazon rainforest have been lost to fire—a 39 percent increase from the same period of last year.

The answer is simple: delusion, despair and desperation. Our "delusion" that the resources nature has bestowed upon us are fungible and will remain there, no matter how much we exploit them; our "despair" at a world that is still reeling from the economic meltdown of 2008; and the resultant "desperation" which has seen a spate of



Aerial picture showing smoke from a two-kilometre-long stretch of fire billowing from the Amazon rainforest about 65km from Porto Velho, in the state of Rondonia, Brazil.

PHOTO: CARL DE SOUZA/AFP

idiosyncratic leaders take the helm across the world, with the mandate of making their countries great again—at any cost, that is.

President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, also called "Tropical Trump", a right-wing political figure, had promised during the election campaign last year to open up the Amazon to economic development, meaning to make it available to quarters who want to exploit the fabled gold mines and use its resources for industrial gains. The result: the raging flames that are burning the lungs of the world.

Known as the carbon sink of the world, the Amazons is a key ally of the humans in combating climate change. According to data gathered from various sources, the Amazon rainforest produces six percent of the world's oxygen, stores 25 percent of the world's carbon, and houses 40,000 species of plant, 3,000 species of freshwater fish and over 370 species of reptiles. Around 25 percent of the medicines used worldwide are derived from plants that grow in the Amazon.

Once in office, Bolsonaro simply slashed

the budget of Brazil's environmental enforcement agency by USD 23 million. Soon enforcement operations became less intensive, resulting in 88 percent more deforestation in June compared to the previous year—according to satellite data which Bolserano refused to acknowledge and fired the director of Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE) for his troubles.

Among the many interesting narratives that have come from Bolsonaro in the

aftermath of the recent Amazon fires, he blamed everyone but himself for this ecological disaster. First, the Brazilian president chided the West for interfering in the "internal" matters of Brazil; then he blamed the environmental NGOs working towards the conservation of the Amazon for having lit the fire themselves, as an act of sabotage in reaction to the president having cut their funds; and finally, he conceded that Brazil does not have the resources required to contain the fire, and when the situation spiralled out of control, he sent the military to the Amazon to try and extinguish the flames.

Of course, this systematic and destructive exploitation of shared communal, or in the case of Amazon, global resources is not a new phenomenon, neither is it limited to any specific part of the world. The tragedy of the commons is most likely older than the great Greek tragedies, a recurring theme of our history, an ingrained human condition.

The Sundarbans in our very own backyard is undergoing systematic deforestation by illegal timber traders and corrupt officials. The much-discussed construction of the Rampal Power Plant and the Payra Port in the vicinity of the Sundarbans, despite their many supposed economic upsides, poses serious risks to the ecological balance of one of the world's largest mangrove forests, and has put it on Unesco World Heritage Committee's list of "World Heritage in Danger". And these are just some of the myriad environmental issues Bangladesh is facing.

The world cannot be a gift that keeps on giving. It is essential that we realise that when a tree falls in the far reaches of the unknown depths of the Amazon, or just in our own backyard in the Sundarbans, it does indeed fall, sending shockwaves into the future. The future might be less tangible, but it is real—and it is coming.

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# GDP growth: Illusions and fallacies



**B**ANGLADESH has been experiencing incomparable growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since the last decade. The latest forecast by the Asian Development Bank ranks Bangladesh at the top among South Asian countries.

Bangladesh is set to achieve a growth of 8 percent in GDP in the current financial year. Previously, financial institutions like the JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs had branded Bangladesh as a frontier country. In becoming a member of the Frontier Five or Next-11, Bangladesh has made improvements in the investment climate, and established itself as an attractive frontier market with cheap labour cost and a large number of economically active populations. Development of the export-oriented industries, like the garment sector, has been contributing to the stable GDP growth and created millions of low-paid jobs. Recently, the World Economic Forum projected Bangladesh as the new "Asian Tiger".

If we investigate the depth of the matter, however, illusions and fallacies within this "growth" become eminent. Let us start by revisiting Acemoglu and Robinson's prediction in the book *Why Nations Fail*. They pointed out that economic growth will never be sustainable and will be destined to fail if the political institutions are extractive in their approach. The statistics of growth shadows the nonexistence of economic dynamism. As Kaushik Basu in 2018 argued, the economic miracle of Bangladesh was driven by the economic inclusion of women and associated social changes. The economic inclusion of women was made possible by the development of the Readymade Garment (RMG) sector. The other contributing factor was foreign remittance. Undeniably, the backbone of Bangladesh's tremendous growth has been the relocation of a huge number

of people from agriculture to industry. The economy will plummet once the relocation is completed, or industries shift to cheaper destinations as has been experienced by Russia in 1970s and '80s.

The prevailing extractive political system will only generate temporal growth. One may ask, how are the political institutions extractive? The answer lies in the fact that economic progress is coming at the expense of the public but benefitting only the elites. For instance, the general public is burdened with increasing indirect taxes such as Value Added Tax (VAT) while tax exemption, evasion, and even provisions of whitening of black money have become prevalent practices for the upper classes. A series of scams have crippled the stock market and the banking sector, forcing the state to continuously recapitalise the banks at the expense of the taxpayers.

The realities of extractive institutions are further manifested in unaccountable public procurement and bribery. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising to see high state officials being involved in unethical activities and possessing undeclared wealth. These tendencies resonate with what James Buchanan termed as "politics without romance" where public representatives and

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The RMG sector is one of the key drivers of Bangladesh's economic growth, contributing 11.17 percent to the country's GDP in the 2017-18 fiscal year.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

public servants are not altruistic in favour of a common good. Instead, unethical alliances between state and non-state agencies extract a nation's wealth.

Economic growth gained through extractive institutions is internally flawed. We are achieving the highest levels of growth, and at the same time, we are experiencing the lowest levels of poverty reduction among South Asian countries. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) shows that the rate of poverty reduction has decreased to 1.2 percent points annually during 2010-2016 from 1.7 percent points during 2005-2010.

Growth of real wage is not promising either. According to the ILO Global Wage Report 2018-2019, Bangladesh achieved 3.4 percent real wage growth in the last 10 years, which is lower than the median growth of

3.7 percent in South Asia. An alarming sign is the increasing rate of external debt. According to Bangladesh Bank, external debt increased from USD 19.355 billion in 2007 to USD 33.1 billion in 2018. The data indicates that Bangladesh is following China in delving into debt-financed infrastructure construction, as evident in the building of bridges, flyovers, metro rails, etc. over the last five years.

Growth in GDP alone cannot ensure what people really need and want. Despite many of us reinforcing market growth by consuming ever more, the new wants and desires appear as illusions when the growth is not matched by employment generation or reduced inequity. Specifically, youth unemployment rate has risen significantly in the last 20 years. According to the "Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2018" of the ILO, youth

(age 15-24 years) unemployment increased from 6.32 percent in 2000 to 12.8 percent in 2017. The Labour Force Survey (2016-2017) found that 29.8 percent of the total youth population are neither in education, nor in employment, nor training (NEET).

Additionally, among the youth with secondary level education, 28 percent remain unemployed as most jobs are created in the informal sector. For more than one-third of the male youth, unemployment is a major obstacle in life, as the BRAC Youth Survey 2019 has revealed. These data indicate that Bangladesh is generating GDP but the youth are not benefiting from it; they are not even receiving the required skill set. Consequently, around 450,000 foreign nationals are working in Bangladesh and reverse-remitting USD 4-5 billion annually. Thus, it is legitimate to enquire whether GDP growth is enhancing prosperity or creating multi-dimensional societal strains.

We are missing out on reaping the demographic dividend while we talk about advancing towards becoming a middle-income country. We believe in the rhetoric of Digital Bangladesh, wishing to be part of a smart city. The government insists on eliminating social division, injustice, and inequality but just a few days ago, everything that we aim to eliminate became strikingly visible in the burning skies of the Chalandika slum in Rupnagar, Mirpur.

Contrary to the ruins that clearly manifest the extreme inequality and unfairness, we have some of Asia's most expensive real estate projects in Dhaka. We see the mushrooming of gated communities, five-star hotels, shopping malls, and restaurants. These illusions have been created by the privileged classes for themselves, and injustice in the society remains real. We should strive to evaluate economic growth with an equity lens. Otherwise, the Asian-Tiger-to-be will only remain illusionary and fallacious, producing miseries for the people.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**

**CHARLOTTE BRONTË**  
(1816–1855)  
English novelist and poet, the eldest of the three Brontë sisters, whose novels became classics of English literature.

*Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized by education; they grow firm there, firm as weeds among stones.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 In the thick of
- 5 Fall short of
- 9 Generous one
- 11 Subsequently
- 12 Led Zeppelin's "Whole -- Love"
- 13 Lower than
- 14 Hot blood
- 15 Onyx feature
- 17 Showing flexibility
- 19 "My word!"
- 20 Spirited horse
- 21 Distress signal
- 22 Digression
- 24 Caterer's dispenser
- 26 Tirades
- 29 Low digit
- 30 Glue's job

**DOWN**

- 1 Improvise on stage
- 2 Julianne and Demi
- 3 Purpose
- 4 Morse "E"
- 5 Look after
- 6 Rainbow color
- 7 Play parts
- 8 Suit fabric
- 10 Mad dog's disease
- 11 Warbled
- 16 Fireplace support
- 18 Campus bigwig
- 21 Dispatch
- 23 "Rats!"
- 24 Like some salons
- 25 Tourist's car
- 27 Vehement speech
- 28 Deceived
- 29 44th president
- 30 Storage spots
- 31 Gaggle group
- 33 Eat in style
- 37 Movie star Cage, familiarly

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

**RECIPE**    **TEEM**  
**IRONIC**    **ULNA**  
**BATTERFRIED**

**TINYAIRS**  
**MARETUPELO**  
**ETALADLOW**  
**WETBARSITE**  
**REEDITCH**

**ALONE**  
**BUTTERFLIED**  
**ISEESELLER**  
**DEANORALLY**

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

HEY! THERE'S A FLY IN MY SOUP!  
 YEAH, BUT LOOK! HE'S STILL MOVING!  
 GO AHEAD AND EAT. THE SOUP DIDN'T HURT HIM

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

WHY DO YOU DRINK COFFEE, DAD?  
 BECAUSE IT WAKES ME UP.  
 YIIIIPE!  
 A COLD GLASS OF JUICE ON THE BACK OF THE KNEE WORKS FASTER.  
 I'LL KEEP THAT IN MIND.

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