

How can senior citizens complete the journey of life alone?

IFTIKHAR AHMED

At present, the global population of senior citizens is growing significantly faster than the population as a whole. It could be speculated that in next 25 years, the elderly population will continue growing more rapidly than other age groups. This increase in the aging population would have a great impact on standard of living, health status and economic growth.

It appears that the aging of populations is poised to become the next big global public health challenge. Advances in medicine and socioeconomic development have substantially reduced mortality and morbidity due to infectious diseases and, to some extent, non-communicable diseases. These sociodemographic and epidemiological changes, coupled with rapid urbanisation, modernisation, globalisation, and accompanying changes in lifestyle, have increased the prevalence of chronic non-infective diseases.

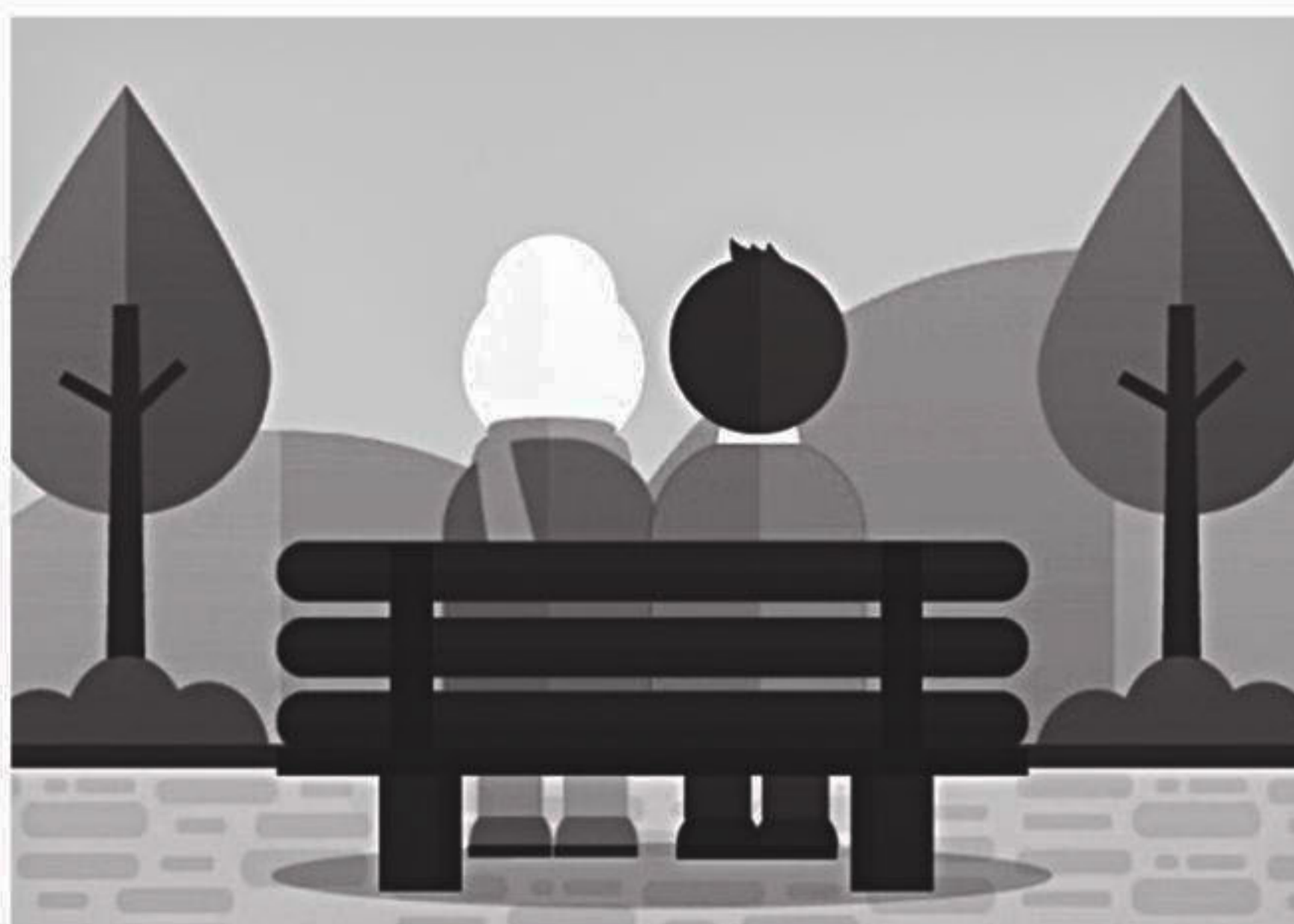
Health systems need to formulate effective strategies to extend appropriately directed healthcare and to respond to the needs of elderly people. As the international momentum toward universal health coverage increases, the specific needs of elderly individuals, who often have many chronic diseases, would have to be addressed by health system researchers. Moreover, the delivery of healthcare for senior citizens which is effective as well as responsive, without imposing high financial burden on individuals, seems to be an excellent achievement when it comes to targeted universal health coverage.

Bangladesh is the eighth largest and one of the most densely populated

countries (based on the United Nations estimates) having 2.19 percent of the total world population. It is worth noting that Bangladesh is among the top 12 developing countries and not an exception from the global phenomenon of demographic aging. In the survey report of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), it is shown that the life expectancy trend is increasing by 0.60 percent every year. In 2017, the average life expectancy was 71.52 in Bangladesh, whereas it was 67.7 years in 2010, 70.4 was in 2013. The percentage of aged population in the world was about 5 percent (7.3 million), which might reach 7 percent (14.6 million) of the total population by the year 2025. As a consequence, aged people are increasing substantially and would demand both medical and sociological facilities.

In Bangladesh, people aged 60 and over are considered as elderly citizens. Although they may remain vibrant and active, aging causes functional deterioration, decline in physical strength and impairment in leading a normal active life. It has been observed that aging is one of the emerging issues in this country which gradually poses an insurgence. Due to certain forms of ignorance prevailing in the community, senior citizens are often associated with various social and economic problems—including threat to national income, increasing dependency, widening of the generation gap, and increasing need of intensive geriatric care.

In traditional agro-based Bangladesh, society was comprised mostly of joint families. Senior citizens were respected by all members of the family and enjoyed important social positions in the extended household.



Unfortunately, the joint families have started splitting into nuclear and smaller sized families and at the same time, old people's situation is changing remarkably. It could be assumed that urbanisation along with modernisation is related to the upsurge of nuclear families.

Modernisation has affected the traditional society and has increased migration from rural to urban and inter country population mobility (in search of a better living) has gone up. Although familial bond in Bangladesh was strong previously, it is gradually breaking in the present-day situation.

Age discrimination creates social, physical, economic insecurity and negligence of the elderly population. Old people are excluded from the normal day-to-day activities of the society. They are considered as "burden and unemployable" in family

and in society.

In some situations, elderly people become more prone to being abused by the younger generation. Many of them are found to be working in the construction sector, agricultural sector, as rickshaw pullers and doing other hazardous works for survival. It is reported that around 95 percent of the elderly people in Bangladesh have experienced health problems—among them, most had multisystem impairment. They mostly suffer from weakness, failing eyesight, hearing loss, hypertension, diabetes, heart diseases and other old-age related illnesses including dementia, Alzheimer diseases, etc. In most cases they avoid consulting with a physician due to poverty. In severe cases, they usually go to village doctors and in some instances, a few of them have consulted qualified doctors. Sometimes they

need long term treatment, but many of them failed to bear the expense of such treatment. It has been stated that the elderly population experience loneliness and depression, either as a result of living alone or due to a lack of close family ties and reduced connections with their culture of origin, which results in an inability to participate in community activities.

Old-age is the beginning of the end of the journey of life, which is a hard but unavoidable reality of human life. Old people deserve greater social commitment from a nation in dealing with their situation.

It is a matter of great appreciation that the Bangladesh government has adopted certain policies, namely, the national policy on aging (NPA), to ensure the dignity, social security, healthcare, etc. of the country's senior citizens. It has allocated some funds for the nongovernment institute called "Bangladesh Association for the Aged and Institute for Geriatric Medicine" (BAAIGM) and initiated the old age allowance programme. Many nongovernment organisations are also taking up programmes focusing on older people.

People should not be neglected because they are aging. Government and non-government organisations, social scientists and physicians should come forward to take care and give respect to elderly Bangladeshis. More awareness, health and welfare programmes should be initiated, arranged and continued so that senior citizens get to live peaceful and enjoyable lives.

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A simple, straightforward reading of South Asian history

AHRAR AHMAD

Dr Nurul Islam has been a towering presence in the intellectual landscape of Bangladesh. He has graduate degrees from Harvard, and held prestigious fellowships at Oxford, Cambridge, LSE, Yale and the Netherland School of Economics, was Professor and Chair of Economics at Dhaka University, and the author of about 29 books of some scholarly heft and influence.

He has also stepped out of the "ivory tower" and been an "engaged intellectual" deeply involved in the swirl of events and arguments that eventually led to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Also, as the first Deputy Chairman of its Planning Commission (1972-75), he accepted the responsibility of providing the policy frameworks and initiatives that were expected to lead his country towards greater material prosperity and social justice.

Internationally, he has been associated with several UN organised bodies, and served in the editorial boards of various international journals. Over the last several decades he has been Assistant Director General at the Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome, and then Senior Policy Advisor at the International Food Policy Research Institute (where he is currently Research Fellow Emeritus) in Washington.

But more than anything else he is a man of letters, a Renaissance Man of eager curiosities, eclectic tastes, refined sensibilities, and astute judgments. Age may have slowed him down a little (he is 90 now), but his mind is as

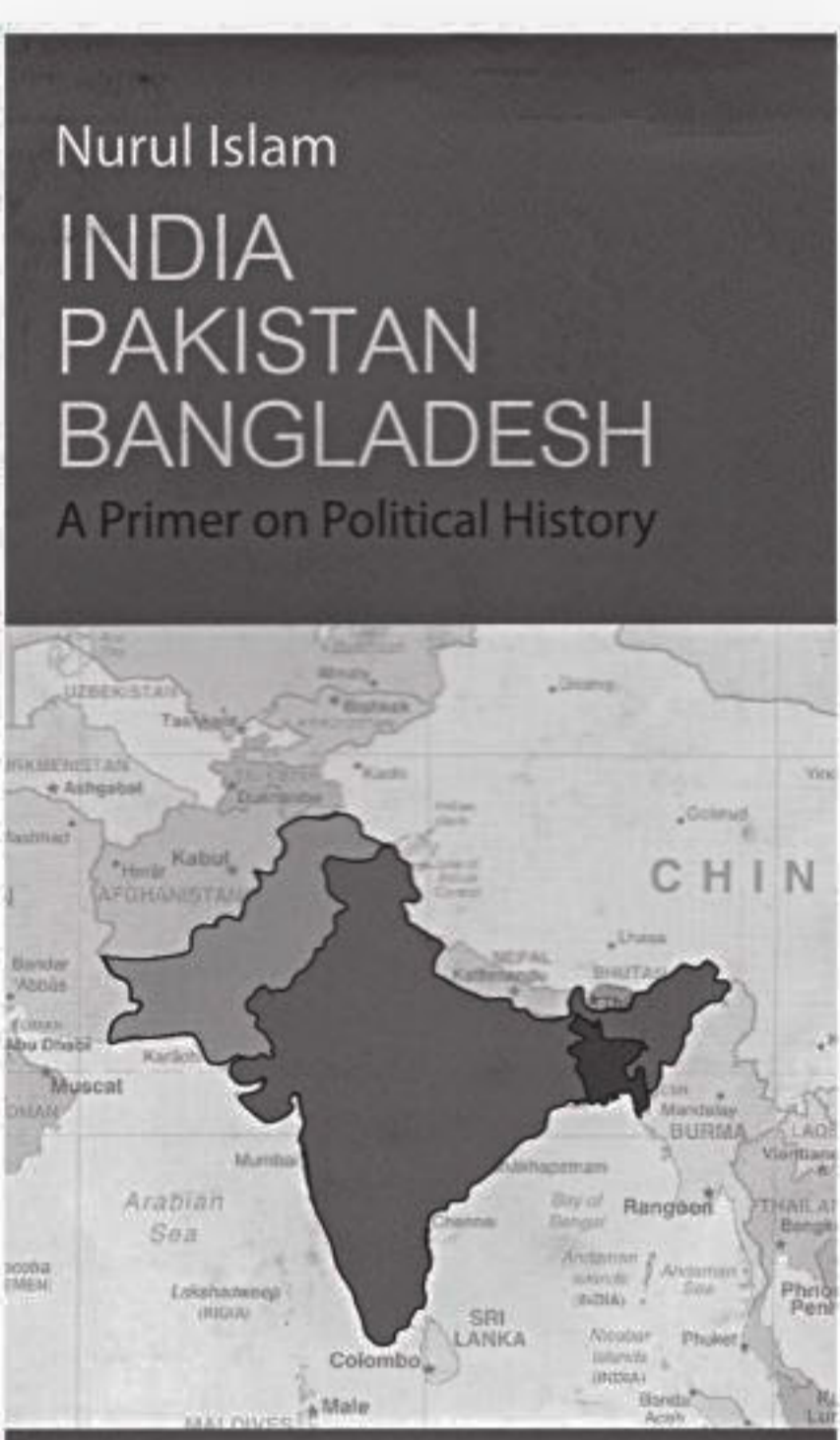
sprightly and nimble as ever, and his sense of history, politics and the human condition remains rich and keen. The current book testifies to his intellectual sophistication and moral clarity.

However, this is unlike most of the technical treatises and policy briefs he had written previously, or memoirist narratives he has penned lately. This is a simple and straightforward reading of history relevant to the political evolution of South Asia.

But of course, no history of South Asia can ever be simple or straightforward. History here is multi-layered, multi-textual, multi-vocal. Dr Islam navigates through this tricky terrain with considerable understanding, deftness and integrity.

The story Dr Islam narrates is well known. It starts with the arrival of the British in India and the incorporation of "natives" into the sinews of the colonial project. The variable response of the Hindus (eager) and Muslims (turning away, and inward) led to educational and employment opportunities for the first, and comparative backwardness and stagnation for the second. The two communities gradually bifurcated in terms of their own demands, ambitions and identities which ultimately led to the division of the country in 1947.

Dr Islam ponders whether this was unavoidable, or whether some of the misperceptions among the communities, the egos and short-term interests of leaders, the pressures of immediacy and mass mobilisations, the hasty rejection of some thoughtful proposals (e.g., the Cabinet Mission Plan) and so on, may have contributed



Cover of Nurul Islam's book "India, Pakistan and Bangladesh: A Primer on Political History".

to its inevitability. However, the Pakistan that was created, with two "wings" of the country separated not only by thousands of miles of Indian territory, but also by linguistic, cultural, demographic, ecological and economic differences, and united merely by the idea of a common religion was, as the author points out, "more a concept than a country". It would be a challenge for any statesman to sustain.

Unfortunately, the country did not have leaders of that vision and ability.

Cultural callousness, political unfairness, administrative arrogance and, most importantly, systematic and obvious economic discrimination, created legitimate grievances and resentments, and fed the logic of autonomy and separatism in the East. Dr Islam himself, with several other scholars, presented the argument of increasing and unacceptable economic disparities with rigour, confidence and moral authority, and became associated with the struggle. The book contains two appendices written earlier by him detailing some of the relevant issues and urgencies relating to the "two-economy thesis" and the "six-point movement" led by Bangabandhu in the 1960s.

Bangladesh became independent in 1971. Dr Islam writes about the challenges not only created by the sheer devastation of the war, but the return of millions of refugees, a crumbling infrastructure, weak governmental institutions, internal tensions, and a fluid international environment.

Bangabandhu announced, and the constitution codified, four fundamental guiding "principles" of the state. But while nationalism and democracy were "dictated by the logic of the independence movement itself", the concepts of socialism and secularism were more complex and amorphous, and became subject to gradual compromise and dilution. Sadly, democracy was also abandoned later and, when reinstated, demonstrated some "illiberal tendencies".

He notes that Bangladesh's progress

has been "checked...uneven...non-linear". The situation in India and Pakistan has not been much better, and all of these countries have departed from their original orientations and commitments and are struggling with increasing economic inequalities and the muscular presence of religiously driven forces. He also laments the fact that the cooperation between the three countries with such a long common history, and facing very similar problems, has not been particularly reassuring.

The strength of the book is not its erudition, analytical novelty, or theoretical richness. It is a slight and slender book (only 93 pages in demy octavo size paper), written as a "primer...for the young and non-specialist". However, it is informed and elegant, its tone and insights are eminently reasonable, and its poise and balance most refreshing and exemplary.

One only wishes that his copy editor had been a bit more prompt and diligent (minor mistakes in spelling, grammar and dates can be distracting), and that the author had written more extensively about the 1,313 days between Bangabandhu's heroic return in 1972 and his dastardly assassination in 1975. He had a ring-side seat, as well as a scholar's detachment. If only Leila (the granddaughter to whom this book is dedicated, and whose persistent questioning about the country's history had initiated this project), had pressed him a bit more about this critical period in our history, and not allowed grandpa to get off so lightly.

Ahrar Ahmad is the Director-General of Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Foundation.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

AUGUST 30, 1996
AN EXPEDITION TO RAISE PART OF THE TITANIC FAILS

A commercial expedition to raise part of the luxury liner ended in failure in the middle of the night when the nylon lines being used to lift a 21-ton section of the hull snapped and the chunk of steel dropped 2 miles back to the bottom of the cold North Atlantic.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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QUOTABLE Quote

RABINDRANATH TAGORE
(1861–1941)
POLYMATH, POET, MUSICIAN, AND ARTIST

You can't cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water.