

An apology to our children

"Since our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago," — Greta Thunberg, United Nations COP24 Climate Summit, Poland 2019

Dear Children of the World,



AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

THIS is a heartfelt apology to you all from me and on behalf of my fellow grownups for leaving behind a messy, scary, volatile world that has the possibility of being completely obliterated by our actions. We are grateful to you and to your

visionary leaders like Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai, activists of the March For Our Lives and the Road Safety Movement (Bangladesh) and countless others, for passionately pointing out to us what we have done and how we have jeopardised your future. They are true heroes.

I apologise for all those lofty claims by us grownups, of how "children are our future" and how we should protect them, when we have done practically everything to ensure that more of you, children, will be tortured, die violent deaths, or be permanently maimed in bomb blasts or gun violence or just choke to death from the fumes of our ignorance. We have managed to create more wars than we ever did for our obsession with grabbing land and resources of others, made refugees out of you and your families, and allowed millions to die in conflicts or as a result of them. In fact, at this point in time we have managed to develop the most technologically advanced and lethal weapons that could wipe out the face of the earth and lead to the extinction of humankind.

We make big commitments at high-powered climate change conferences. But at home we are gleefully cutting down trees, lush forests that could have saved us from cyclones and abnormal heat waves and provided the oxygen we need to live on; we have filled up precious rivers or killed them with toxic waste—all in the name of "development"—ironically to ensure a better future for you!

So despite hearing about how fossil fuels are contributing to the world heating up (with an increase of about one degree Celsius since the pre-industrial era), leading to glaciers melting and the extreme weather patterns we are already witnessing, we still decide to pour in money to build coal plants instead of renewable energy systems using solar or wind technology. Why do we do this? Oh, because, you see, we are greedy and addicted to power. We cannot help but be attracted to the wads of dollars that will go into our pockets if we cut trees and replace them with noisy, dirty fuel-making plants. Did Greta say 200 species are going extinct every day because of loss of habitat? Animals, plants, trees—I'm afraid we don't really care. As Greta said, most of us are just not bothered about what will happen fifty years from now—we'll be dead anyway. Oh, and our children? Yes, it is sad that they will live in such difficult circumstances and could very well be looking at a dystopian future: a future, say, like the one in the fictional web television series "The Handmaid's Tale" (based on Margaret Atwood's novel), where pollution and disease have drastically lowered fertility rates and America—the icon of progressive thought and freedoms of all kinds—is ruled by a militarised authoritarian, repressive regime where women are degraded in the most horrific ways and have no rights whatsoever. Unfortunately, as extreme

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PHOTO: REUTERS/BAZ RATNER

Environmental activists march carrying signs as they take part in the Global Climate Strike calling for action on climate change, in Nairobi, Kenya, on September 20, 2019.

and farfetched as it sounds, many of these frightening scenes are no longer fictional. Yet here we are, doing nothing about it.

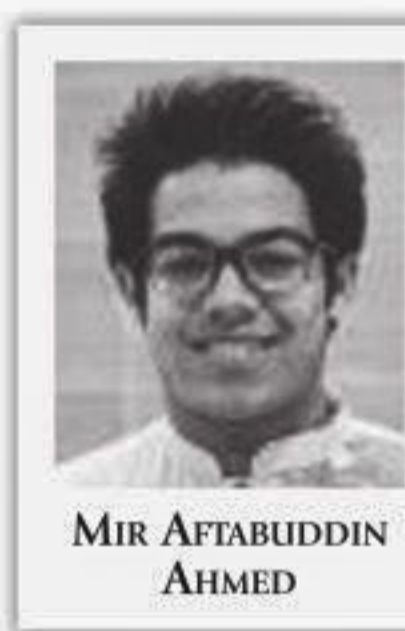
We are also deeply remorseful for not giving you any role models to follow. We have elected leaders who do not believe women should be treated as equal human beings, who allow the grossest injustices to be inflicted on the powerless, who do nothing to provide the people with access to education, nutritious food, shelter and basic healthcare, and who use misogyny, racism, bigotry and xenophobia to get elected and re-elected. We tolerate leaders who deny climate change and conveniently forget that the biggest polluters like the US have a moral responsibility to reduce their fossil fuel emissions and contribute to the Green Climate Fund. These people are deaf to Greta's intense warnings regarding how we must stop everything and focus on formulating policies that will protect whatever little natural resources we have in

the globe and prevent further destruction.

As she has painfully stated, she could not believe that climate change was real because if it was, then that would be all that we would be talking about! It's shocking how blinded we have become by our own selfishness and obsession to feel superior to everyone else!

It is a tragedy that you will have to witness terrible things. There will be more people fleeing their homelands as new wars break out on the flimsiest of grounds, even false ones, causing mass exodus of people into countries where nobody really wants them because they are considered economic burdens. There may be very few trees left as the old ones will be murdered to clear the way for development projects, malls, arcades and luxury apartments for the elite and the powerful. You will have to strictly ration the water because the rivers will all be dead—we are making sure of that by encroaching on them and poisoning the water with toxic industrial waste. The ground water will be dried up and all other waterbodies filled up

A story less told: Bangladesh's success in green RMG production



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

EARLIER this month, *Made in Bangladesh*, a film that brings to light the predicament of workers in Bangladesh's readymade garments (RMG) industry, was screened amidst much anticipation at the prestigious Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). The film features a thought-provoking tale about the struggles of female garment workers, the obstructions faced in the process of unionisation, and importantly, questions regarding working conditions in the backdrop of the infamous Rana Plaza disaster in 2013. Nevertheless, while the film brings forth crucial features of the RMG industry which require our attention, it refrains from acknowledging a different side of Bangladesh which ought to be appreciated.

Around the same time that *Made in Bangladesh* premiered in Toronto, Washington-based non-profit organisation US Green Building Council (USGBC) declared Bangladesh to be the leader in green RMG production—6 out of the top 10 LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified factories are situated in Bangladesh, with 25 Bangladeshi factories credentialed with the highest certification from the USGBC.

In hindsight, following the Rana Plaza catastrophe, efforts of the consortium of entrepreneurs, workers and the government to navigate the country towards sustainable RMG production have not only been noticeable, but also remarkable when one considers the harsh and somewhat self-righteous criticism by the West against Bangladesh.

It is no secret that the present government has given priority to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across several aspects of its governance structure, and in so doing, it has given a clear message to RMG producers of the need to introduce eco-friendly measures in production processes, especially after 2013.

Green Production falls in line with the need to identify the threats posed by climate change, whilst simultaneously recognising the continuing importance of the RMG sector to the country. Theoretically, environmental protection has three broad facets, namely mitigation, adaptation and compensation—as such, navigating towards green production is part of a series of adaptation measures led by the business industry to accelerate the journey towards achieving the SDGs on a wholesale level. Therefore, to see Bangladesh as the global leader in Green Production is indeed a proud moment for the country—and it goes to show that the RMG industry has indeed understood, if

not fully implemented, the feasibility of sustainable production.

Green Factories represent a relatively new institutional approach towards making business processes more sustainable. The Japanese multinational firm Fujitsu defines Green Factories as "facilities that pursue a unified approach in striving to reduce the amount of materials and energy used in business operations, minimise the amounts of chemical discharge, waste, and air pollution produced through business operations, and also minimise manufacturing costs." In addition to these, an important feature of Green Factories lies in the realm of how these establishments are expected to put emphasis on compliance mechanisms

characteristics of green production techniques, as promoted by the USGBC.

The advantages posed by Green Factories to third-party actors, termed external benefits, are equally eye-opening—from ensuring drastic improvements in clean water accessibility to reducing pollution levels in surrounding areas, green production techniques create innumerable social benefits for people living around factories. This has been an area of concern for some time, and therefore moving towards green production is not only a need of the time, but a mandatory step for Bangladesh to take in its quest for augmenting environmental protection schemes.

The total number of LEED-certified Green Factories in Bangladesh increased

the financing towards green production has been done without state-based incentives.

Consumers of Green Factories, most prominently the global multinationals, which have a long history of sanctimoniously criticising Bangladeshi factories—that too without doing much to tangibly support the improvement of working conditions or sustainable production—have, therefore, a moral responsibility to support the growth of green production. This means recognising the quality of what Bangladeshi firms produce, financially assisting the transition of the industry towards green production techniques and at the same time, paying firms their due share when it comes to purchases.

We tend to forget that a large aspect of why labour conditions and wage levels remain low is in the vicinity of the unfair and almost incomprehensible prices paid by global multinationals for RMG products. International consumers prefer Bangladeshi products over that of other countries not only because its RMG goods are cheap, but because of the superior quality of the textile and clothing produced by some of the most efficient workers in the world.

Therefore, it is equally important for films like *Made in Bangladesh* to showcase that global brands and Western societies carry a higher proportion of the responsibility than local stakeholders in addressing the plights of our RMG industry. We should recognise that while Bangladesh is doing its bit with its given capacity, in instilling sustainability in its economic structures, it cannot take the whole brunt of the blame for the problems the RMG sector now faces.

Bangladesh has taken a lead in establishing production techniques that ought to be the norm in the near future—Green Production successfully addresses aspects of both profitability and efficiency, that too by holistically considering the effects of production on workers, the environment and third-party actors. One would hope that the government of Bangladesh institutionalises the idea of green production techniques on a broader scale, through specific legislation, subsidisation measures and financial support, with the aim to ensure an efficient transition towards wide-ranging sustainability techniques.

The challenge for RMG stakeholders lies in encouraging small and medium sized factories to shift towards Green Production—and that remains the next area for the BGMEA, the broader business community and the government to address unitedly, and importantly, through specific structural changes to the way businesses operate in the country.

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A still from 'Made in Bangladesh'. Many of the problems portrayed in films like this, or by Western media outlets, can be addressed if green production structures are diffused across the wider RMG sector in Bangladesh. PHOTO: STAR/FILE

and regulatory architectures which promote, protect and preserve both environmental and labour rights. Therefore, many of the problems portrayed in films like *Made in Bangladesh*, or by Western media outlets, can indeed be addressed if green production structures are diffused across the wider RMG sector in Bangladesh.

From an economic viewpoint, Green Production is financially viable, as it is aimed at reducing costs through streamlined production processes, whilst concurrently ensuring an institutional emphasis on reducing overall waste in factories—water recycling, instilling material efficiency levels and controlling air pollution are a few of the key

to 91 in 2019 from 67 in 2018. Faisal Samad, the vice-president of the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), recently indicated that whilst Bangladesh tops the chart in Green Production globally, it needs to continue investing its resources and technology in further divesting sustainable techniques across the board.

A startling feature of the entire story has been the nature of the initiatives taken by the entrepreneurial community in Bangladesh—the government has indeed given normative instructions to the business leadership as to the need to bring in eco-friendly measures in their production processes, yet in terms of funding and subsidisation, much of

with our concrete fantasies. Birds will no longer migrate from as far as Siberia to Savar (Bangladesh) as their habitats will have been decimated to build dorms and administrative buildings. You will only read about the Royal Bengal Tiger in the Sundarbans and merely wonder what a mangrove forest could look like. Ocean floors will be filled with plastic, and fish and other aquatic creatures will be poisoned by this ghastly, non-biodegradable pollutant. In fact, given the speed of extinction every year (one thousand species!), you may rest assured that there will be very few living creatures in your future.

We also regret the fact that instead of increasing opportunities for the girls amongst you to be educated, we have actually regressed to a point where we have more child marriages than ever, forcing girls to drop out of school, abandon their dreams, be subject to sexual and other forms of violence, and bear babies that their bodies are not ready for.

As bizarre as it sounds, we have made the roads more unsafe for you (those of you who may survive) despite your wonderful efforts to create awareness about traffic rules and force us grownups to follow them. Instead of applauding you, we have tried to intimidate you and silence your voices. We have not done anything to protect you from madmen who decide to use their semiautomatic weapons to take revenge on innocent people, many of them children, like you.

Although we celebrate you and your leaders for taking such bold steps, going on strike or protesting in the streets to make us grownups listen, how can we not hang our heads in shame? We have used religion, nationalism and "protection of democratic values" as excuses to pillage, destroy and kill. We have forced you to grow up far ahead of your time, robbed you of carefree childhoods, forced you to come out of school and essentially be the grownups to shake us up and make us hear you because, at this point, your very existence and that of your world are on the brink of annihilation.

We have failed you, dear children, so please try to forgive us if you can. We hope your voices will reach us before it is too late.

Aasha Mehreen Amin is Senior Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, *The Daily Star*.

QUOTABLE Quote



HERMAN HESSE
(1877 - 1962)
German-born poet, novelist, and painter

Some of us think holding on makes us strong but sometimes it is letting go

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Federal troops sent into Little Rock, Arkansas

On this day in 1957, racial desegregation took centre stage when federal troops were dispatched to Little Rock, Arkansas, to maintain order and enforce the right of black students to attend the local public high school.

September 24, 1957

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