

Happy 20/20



MILIA ALI

SHIFTING IMAGES

I am sitting at my desk, with a hot cup of tea, peering out at the foggy winter morning enveloping the placid Gulshan Lake. As I reminisce about the events of the past year, I am overwhelmed by the deep realisation that soon the curtain will come down on 2019. The reflective mood, tinted with nostalgia, is engendered by thoughts about the hopes and expectations for 2020. It's a momentous year, as it marks the beginning of a whole new decade.

2019 has been a mixed bag, both domestically and at the global level. Bangladesh accelerated its upward trajectory of economic growth outshining the performance of all other South Asian countries. Poverty levels have declined, but social equity still dodges us. Talking about social equity, my thoughts immediately revert to the man who strived to change the lives of the nation's disempowered and disadvantaged. On December 22, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, more fondly known as Abed Bhai, the founder and mentor of the largest NGO, BRAC, passed away, leaving the country bereft of an elder statesman, social reformer, and above all a strong voice for the poor and underprivileged. Abed Bhai's work at BRAC resonated with global leaders, development practitioners, and social activists. He not only transformed the lives of millions of Bangladeshi women and children, but also put Bangladesh on the world's socio-economic map. Abed Bhai, you will be missed, especially now when the world needs agents of social change.

Analysing the past is easier than predicting the future, even for the most prescient. However, if recent events are predictors of future trends, the portents for 2020 seem disturbing, to say the least. 2019 has been, as one scholar described it, the year of "democratic recession". In the US, President Trump continued to shock us with his unconstitutional acts. His blatant abuse of power compelled Congress to impeach him in December. People around the world may consider Donald Trump's impeachment as a US domestic issue. But this is certainly not the case if one looks at his errant behaviour with a wider lens. His monarchical actions and total disregard for democratic norms have encouraged leaders in several countries to trample on the Constitution, attack the judiciary, and railroad discriminatory legislation. Close to home, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi passed an unprecedented Citizenship Amendment Bill that provides a path to Indian citizenship to all minorities fleeing persecution, except Muslims. His ruling party also set up a National Citizenship Register that seems to specifically disenfranchise the Muslim minority. Prime Minister Orban of Hungary went against the judicial system to pass drastic laws to weaken opposition after their success at the local level. China has interned three million Uyghur Muslims in concentration camps, claiming that the action is, in effect, a "re-education programme". Myanmar's Ang San Su Kyi, the "Nobel Peace Prize" winner, staunchly defended her government's mass killing, torture and rape against a Muslim minority group, the Rohingya, who were forced to flee to Bangladesh. All these transgressions were undertaken with impunity. At least that is what seems to be the case.

The question for us looking forward into 2020 is: Will there be an open resistance to thwart these political excesses? The trends do not bode well, but there has been some ray of hope in the form of protests against the ruling elite and the prevailing status quo by ordinary people. What is encouraging is that these have been spearheaded by students and young people, and not by political parties. Also, they centre on issues that affect the common folk. This means that there is an increased

disobedience movements in Chile, Beirut, Sudan and Algeria have a common thread—the young are raising their voices to counter corruption and unfairness of the ruling class. Hong Kong is again an example of mass protests resisting China's attempt to curb its autonomy.

A reason why youth has become more active in bringing about change is because technology has enabled information sharing and it is easier to mobilise opposition. The widespread

participate in politics, especially at the grassroots level. They now make up a good chunk of elected lawmakers and members of parliament the world over. This has translated in more awareness and positive actions to fight discrimination and sexual assault, and demand equal rights for women. When I look at these developments my spirits are buoyed, for they have transcended the boundaries of nation, race and class to champion a common cause for the benefit of the majority.

Despite the general despondency, the outlook for the future may not be that grim. Quoting Steven Pinker's book, *Enlightenment Now*, Bill Gates points out that the global average IQ score of children is rising by about 3 IQ points every decade, probably due to improved nutrition and greater exposure. Gates also writes: "Our world today encourages abstract thought from a young age, and it's making us smarter." If this is true, we have reason to be optimistic—after all these smart kids, with high IQs will be positioned to bring about increased sharing of ideas, tolerance and innovative thinking.

On a personal note, I have decided to look at the glass half full. With time, I have realised that most external problems aren't really a big deal. The only thing that matters is inner peace, which is mostly determined by successful relationships and a sense of contentment. Recently, I heard someone say that the three most important words for achieving a state of equilibrium are: "Let it go". For, when we let things go, we begin to look at our world with a different perspective. And, we realise that "with all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world".

Happy New Year!!

Milia Ali is a Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.



awareness among the youth about problems that negatively impact the future of their world and not that of special interest groups. It is encouraging to note that these actions are global and devoid of political, ethnic, or racial overtones. In India, for example, the mass movement against the unconstitutional citizenship bill is led by students, intelligentsia and local communities. The recent civil

and instant interchange of ideas has also made today's young people more tolerant, and knowledgeable about the changes needed for the welfare of the masses. For example, 16-year-old activist, Greta Thunberg, spearheaded the world youth climate movement and issued a stern rebuke to world leaders about its threat to our future. Again, the #MeToo movement has acted as a catalyst for many young women to

The United States and the world: Troubled present, uncertain future



ASHFAQ SWAPAN

CHRONOLOGICAL markers, like the end of a year, are an arbitrary human contrivance, but it's a useful occasion to take stock. 2019's end has also brought the end

of a decade, so perhaps one can take a longer view.

For the United States, the year gone by has caused concern both within and outside. The year 2019 ended with its president being impeached only for the third time in its two-century-long history. The broader context is even more alarming—the nation is bitterly divided and hyperpolarised.

Outside the US, the United Kingdom, which has just voted for a party to get it out of the European Union, also remains bitterly divided.

Unrest and unhappiness manifested all over the world in loud public protests.

All over Latin America, the *Latinoamericano Primavera* (Latin American Spring) saw massive public protests in a slew of nations against horrendous inequality, draconian austerity and corrupt political machines.

Democratic activists in Hong Kong fought pitched battles with brutal police; citizens turned out *en masse* in Indian cities to protest a draconian citizenship law.

In Europe—and beyond—one response to socio-economic distress has been the rise of populist, ultranationalist parties. From Turkey to Hungary, hypernationalist machismo reigns—with a chilling disdain for such political niceties

as freedom of public discourse, independence of the judiciary, press or academia.

Does the US have its act together to forge forward with a path that is mutually beneficial for itself and the rest of the world?

The question may raise the hackles of some readers. Why should the US, a nation with a notoriously insular public, call the shots in global politics? Its past history is peppered with dark, unconscionable involvements. (Guatemala 1954, Indonesia 1964, Vietnam 1955-1975—to pick just a few random examples.)

Well, that's just the way the world is. Like it or not, the US is the 800-pound gorilla in global affairs. Take the recent

nuclear accord with Iran. The US decision to torpedo it has crippled the accord, despite the support of all other parties.

Following the Second World War, the US, the economic powerhouse of the world, became a predominant player in global geopolitics. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, launched following the Bretton Woods Conference in New Hampshire in 1944, and the United Nations, founded after a meeting in San Francisco in 1945, established US preeminence.

If there is a lesson to be learned from history, it is that effective global policymaking requires a commitment to multilateralism. All international accords are the fruit of patient,

painstaking negotiations conducted with a give-and-take attitude. No party gets all it wants, a painful price is often paid by the parties, yet all is done for a greater good.

Former President Barack Obama's successful multilateral nuclear accord with Iran is a case in point. Both Iran and the US swallowed some bitter pills, yet the final accord was widely hailed as a landmark achievement towards peace.

The advent of Donald J Trump has upset the apple cart. Like a bull in a china shop, the US president has given diplomacy and multilateralism short shift. One of his more egregious policy decisions was to unilaterally walk out of the accord with Iran, essentially telling the whole world that the US could no longer be trusted to keep its word. Everybody, including the US, agreed that Iran was compliant with the accord.

Trump left Kurdish allies to the tender mercies of Turkey in Syria, got the US into a dangerous trade war with China and egged on Britain to leave the EU. But bluster and threats, Trump and his ilk will discover, only go so far. Contrast the current wrangling with China over trade with the historic commitment the US and China made in 2016 to abide by the Paris climate agreement.

The present Trump administration's tone reeks of jingoism and arrogance. Its penchant to cozy up with autocrats like Russia's Vladimir Putin, North Korea's Kim Il-Jong and Saudi Arabia's Muhammad bin Salman doesn't help.

Then there is a key problem of policy. An underlying common thread runs through the diversity of protests all over the world. Globalisation, it turns out, is not all it's cracked out to be. The protests are a *cri de coeur* from the masses it has left behind.

There is little sign the Trump administration has the slightest

sensitivity to this. In fact, its actions suggest the very opposite. It's massive tax cuts to the super-rich left a huge hole in the US budget, its close aides include lobbyists, investment bankers and CEOs.

Its attitude to climate change brings into sharp relief how far removed the US is from the global mood. While the world watches with alarm the looming environmental catastrophe, Trump has left the Paris accord, fighting and/or undermining all US environmental laws, and going after states like California which attempt to set higher standards.

Given this grim reality, the appearance of an effective, positive US leadership in global affairs in the immediate future has a snowball's chance in hell. A change of guard in 2020 might make a difference, but that's far down the road.

So here we are then—the US saddled with a jingoistic, science-denying leader prone to issue a rude juvenile tweet at the slightest provocation when global diplomacy needs tact, finesse and sensitivity. In the meantime, nation after nation in the world is roiled by a public fed up with the gross inequality and corruption in their countries. Amidst this toxic ferment, a slew of silver-tongued demagogues is rising, holding supporters in thrall with a potent brew of xenophobia and intolerance for dissent.

Lord knows it's not a very pretty picture. The only hope, such as it is, that I draw, is from former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban's exasperated, resigned observation: "Men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives."

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PHOTO: REUTERS/DAVID BECKER/FILES

The advent of Donald J Trump has upset the apple cart. Like a bull in a china shop, the US president has given diplomacy and multilateralism short shift.

QUOTABLE Quote

TS ELIOT
(1888-1965)

American-English poet, playwright, literary critic, and editor.

For last year's words belong to last year's language. And next year's words await another voice. And to make an end is to make a beginning.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Yule display
- 7 High cards
- 11 Bank worker
- 12 Brussels-based org.
- 13 Game quest
- 14 Use incisors
- 15 Felt
- 17 Deep cut
- 20 Bonnie's partner
- 23 Burma's first prime minister
- 24 Humiliating failures
- 26 Major lang.
- 27 Lamb's father
- 28 Braying beast
- 29 "— greetings"
- 31 Social page word
- 32 Maryland players, for short
- 33 Hardy heroine

DOWN

- 1 Pennies: Abbr.
- 2 Stephen of "The Crying Game"
- 3 North Pole worker
- 4 Conflict
- 5 On this spot
- 6 The Emerald Isle
- 7 Heralds in a carol
- 8 Christmas treat
- 9 Seventh Greek letter
- 10 Boar's mate
- 16 Cons
- 17 Party attendee
- 18 Year, in France
- 19 Christmas treat
- 21 Rx amounts
- 22 Road curves
- 24 Winter window coating
- 25 McKellen of "X-Men"
- 30 Fruitcake ingredients
- 33 Nasal sound
- 35 Identical
- 36 Wildly eager
- 37 Sched. placeholder
- 38 Everyone
- 40 Malleable metal
- 41 Earth-friendly prefix
- 42 Slump

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	A	R	D	S	T	T	U	B	A	S
A	L	E	U	T	I	N	U	S	E	
S	I	L	E	N	T	N	I	G	H	T
S	T	Y	I	N	S	S	Y	S		
C	R	A	N	K	L	O	R	D	S	
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A	R	I	E	L		E	L	V	E	S
R	E	T	R	I		D	I	A	N	A

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott