

Magical thinking in the time of Covid-19

This is the first article of a two-part series.



#Research-Mesearch

OVER the past few weeks, I have heard variations of “I don’t know why but I don’t think Bangladesh will be affected by Covid-19 in the way that other countries have been.” That obvious kind of magical thinking, expressed by a friend, an uncle, and even my mother, is almost endearing; for, it is so clearly an expression of love. And fear. It makes you want to hug them and say, “yes, me too.”

But it’s hard not to fret, especially about the working class who always bear the brunt of disaster. Workers in the global South form the backbone upon which global capitalism is built and billionaires are made. Yet, it is those workers who are treated like cattle that capitalists feel free to herd at will.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that amid the coronavirus shutdown that the government of Bangladesh consciously termed a “holiday,” presumably to prevent panic and hysteria, workers, mostly migrant, left Dhaka for their homes in the village. In direct conflict with the government’s shutdown protocol, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) asked workers to return to work, threatening their mostly female workers with nonpayment of their wages and termination if they did not return to work. That absent transportation, hundreds of these workers were forced to walk back to the city on foot, is a gendered human rights concern. That BGMEA, upon admonishment by civil-society, withdrew the directive to return to work, expecting workers to then walk back to their village homes, is classic class oppression. That the Home Minister then asked law enforcement to prevent people from entering the city to aide BGMEA’s mission is neoliberalism 101. Indeed, worker exploitation and oppression are inherent to neoliberalism.

That amid this fiasco, workers received limited messaging about the deadly virus and that no effort was made to keep workers safe from it as they travelled back to Dhaka make clear that there is no concern for their lives.

The only concern is for the labour that they can collectively provide to fill the pockets of those who “own” them. This is not merely irresponsible; this is gross negligence on the part of BGMEA, signalling an enduring modus operandi akin to slavery. If these workers die in the coming weeks, who will take responsibility?

This debacle regarding garment workers in Bangladesh is but one of a host of other problems that are specific to the global South: inaccurately reported numbers of Covid-19 related deaths; growing stigma resulting in rejection of patients suspected of being infected with Covid-19; and, inadequate measures to prevent spread of the virus.

We already know that social distancing, or physical distancing as we’ve been calling it to centre social solidarity amid the crisis, is a luxury that few can afford. Further, it appears that such protocols may deepen existing social and economic disparities, particularly in countries where much of the population live in informal settlements or slums. Physical distancing, as such, has to be applied differently in densely populated locations: not individually, but by communities—*bostis, paras, mohollas*, neighbourhoods, even villages, if need be, to curb transmission from one locality to another. Each unit, ideally, should have its own designated clinic for Covid-19 patients, which, absent reliable testing, should treat everyone with Covid-19 symptoms as infected, trace their contacts, and quarantine everyone, while those with severe symptoms should be hospitalised. Testing has been unreliable in many locations and serve as a warning for countries that are behind in the pandemic, as they plan to prevent transmission of infection.

That raises the question of preparedness. Bangladesh’s medical and health infrastructure remains underequipped to handle a pandemic. It should be stated unequivocally that Bangladesh does not have the capacity to treat severe cases of Covid-19 given the nation’s limited number of ventilators they have—one for every 340,000. Clearly, there is a need to acquire ventilators. Multilateral aid agencies and international organisations, the United Nations in particular, that forced countries like Bangladesh to adopt neoliberal policies



Hundreds of people, mostly RMG workers, walking to Dhaka in flocks at Patgram of Mymensingh to resume work.

PHOTO: STAR

(such as, privatisation and deregulation) must bear responsibility for providing assistance to ramp up medical infrastructure to tackle this pandemic. That the World Bank has approved USD 100 million in financing for Bangladesh to respond to Covid-19 is a promising start.

On an individual level, wearing masks is a practical way to curb transmission. Those who *can* isolate themselves should do so as not to unnecessarily burden the health care system. Employers are particularly well-placed to use their discretion to ensure that non-essential work that can be done from home is done from home. Amid limited supply of surgical masks, the Center for Disease Control suggests the use of cloth masks for use in public spaces. But concerns about correct use remain—such masks need to be disinfected after each use, which depends on availability of water and sanitation. People need to be made aware of these risks. Educating people about Covid-19 and preventive measures could still go a long way toward minimising transmission of the virus. One of the key problems with the way the Bangladesh government handled the otherwise effective shutdown was that decisions (such as announcing a holiday)

were made seemingly without informing citizens about Covid-19 and the extent to which they were vulnerable to it.

As the number of Covid-19 cases surge, a crisis looms.

At the time of this writing, three districts and over 50 neighbourhoods across Dhaka have been identified as hotspots and are now under police enforced lockdown. Amid limited testing, we know that this kind of lockdown will have little effect; for the spread to stop, the lockdown has to be enforced across the country, while keeping essential services open.

It is time that Bangladesh seek help from the regional hegemon, India, a country that has long benefited from Bangladesh’s friendship (the Rampal Coal Plant in the Sundarbans come to mind). Given that Bangladesh is surrounded by India on all three sides, it is also in India’s interest to make sure Bangladesh effectively addresses the crisis of Covid-19. Mahindra, an Indian company, is making ventilators; Bangladesh should leverage their friendship to acquire said ventilators. But, given how India has been dealing with the crisis within India—

by utilizing nationalistic tropes of unity, banging pots and pans, and lighting *diyas*, while starving its poor and beating members of marginalised communities amid a lockdown—it’s not clear if India will be able to rise to the occasion and be the true regional superpower that it postures as and save the region from disease and destruction. Perhaps the only viable and able bilateral aid donor at this time is China.

It is when we find ourselves backed up against a wall that we start indulging in magical thinking. I’ve done it, so have others, and none of it is because we don’t know how to think critically. It is because when the world seemingly closes in on us, and our brains start to spin, our hearts try to stabilise us, even if in the form of false hope. And there are a lot of (false) hope out there. A study by Qasim Bukhari and Yusuf Jameel, and another by Chin and colleagues, suggest that the virus may slow down in humid or hot conditions. Another study suggests that the BCG vaccine may be protective against Covid-19. These are all possibilities, not proofs. The BCG vaccine is currently undergoing clinical trials as a cure for Covid-19 (as are others). Until trials reveal conclusive positive results about the efficacy of possible cures, this much is clear: there is no magic potion that will make the virus disappear. Not yet.

As such, these studies, while inspiring magical thinking (and perhaps even hope), cannot become excuses for further inaction and shirking of responsibilities—effective public health interventions are *required* to slow down transmission of Covid-19 till we have effective tests and, importantly, vaccines. Said interventions must include direct cash transfers and rationing to ensure food security for workers. Famines occur when the haves hoard everything, leaving nothing for the have-nots. Let us not do that, even if the current crisis (understandably) triggers war-time and famine related trauma. Finally, Bangladesh should *not* take a page out of the United States’ playbook and roll out a plan that primarily benefits corporations and industrialists as if trickle-down economics hasn’t already been debunked.

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The Sanders campaign: A requiem

Biden won the battle, but Bernie won the war



“Politics is the art of the possible.”
— Otto von Bismarck, German chancellor

AFTER a spirited, valiant battle for the Democratic nomination for US presidential elections in November, Bernie Sanders, a US senator from Vermont, called it a day.

Cheer up, Bernie supporters!

Former US Vice President Joe Biden may be the putative Democratic candidate, but Sanders did himself proud. The proud, octogenarian curmudgeon’s rants against “the billionaires and millionaires” in his trademark thick Brooklyn accent will continue to reverberate in the 2020 campaign.

The Biden campaign is scrambling to woo him. Come November, the US presidential election might go down to the wire. Democrats realise they need every possible vote. Bernie supporters are a critical chunk they can ill afford to lose.

Though my favourite candidate was Elizabeth Warren, a US senator from Massachusetts, I deeply admire and love Bernie and his supporters. I also have to say, with regret, that their campaign was seriously hamstrung, a crucial point to which I shall return.

But first of all, let’s give credit where credit is due. Bernie Sanders put back the soul into the Democratic Party. Gentrified and technocrat-driven in the recent past, the party sometimes seems driven by policies that do not take the measure of how horribly the bottom half of Americans have been shortchanged in the past few decades. Wealth

distribution is obscenely lopsided, benefiting a tiny percentage at the very top of the American socio-economic pyramid.

The economic gap is driven by class and demographics of race and age. No wonder the Sanders campaign managed to really fire up the young. Saddled with huge college loans, facing dismal job prospects and scary health care costs, young people have an acute sensitivity to the inequities of US society.

His overarching indictment of the gross inequity of US society struck a chord with a

His name won’t appear on the November ballot, but expect Biden to incorporate a number of your policy planks, or come really close. And that’s not just to woo you (although there’s a bit of that, too), it’s also because Sanders’ presidential campaigns in 2016 and this year have changed Democratic politics. A publicly-run health system dubbed Medicare-for-all used to be a non-starter; many of this year’s candidates backed it. Ditto for student loan debt forgiveness.

Former US President Barack Obama

well become historical footnotes; Sanders, on the other hand, could be remembered for his transformational politics.

Now, Bernie supporters, some tough love on how to make that happen.

First, you have to recognise where you screwed up.

Democratic politics is a messy, imperfect business. Integrity, principled commitment to the common good is wondrous. But it’s not enough. At the end of the day, you have to *convince* enough people that your policies are right and you can win. And to do that, you need to be flexible, engage in give and take, cut policy deals here and there.

You can be pure as the driven snow, and become a political martyr. Or you can expand your coalition. My own interactions with the odd expat Bangladeshi who had “felt the Bern” left me sceptical. Passionate and utterly sure of themselves, they were not inclined to brook any compromise at all.

In fact, the Bernie campaign tacitly conceded they could not win a majority. They based their strategy on a plan that expected the non-Bernie primary vote do be divided and their candidate romping hope with 30 percent of the vote.

It did not quite pan out that way.

After the first primaries in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada, Bernie supporters were delighted with his performance. Then South Carolina happened. African American voters, a decisive factor in the state, voted overwhelmingly for Biden.

The African American community gets to decide who gets to be the Democratic nominee and I deeply respect that. This proved to be the undoing of Sanders. After an overwhelming win in South Carolina, Biden didn’t look back.

No, Bernie supporters, it was not because the fat cats of the Democratic Party all ganged

up against you, because they didn’t. They were still sitting on the fence.

After the primaries in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada, the Biden campaign was in its death throes. It had no money and virtually non-existent infrastructure in the vast majority of states. He still won convincingly, sometimes overwhelmingly.

Why did African Americans support Biden? I would speculate two reasons. One is Biden’s unflinching, devoted support of Obama during his presidency. Their second reason, I suspect, is what drew all other non-Bernie players to coalesce against Sanders as well.

I forget which astute analyst made the observation, but he was right on the money—what Biden had going for him was the greatest ever get-out-the-vote incentive for Democrats in recent history, Donald Trump, our current president.

Trump is the king of dirty politics, and he is flush with campaign cash. My feeling is that many primary voters ultimately chose Biden although they liked and admired Bernie. They figured many of “democratic socialist” Bernie’s policy positions—Medicare for all, moratorium on deportations and decriminalising illegal border crossings—would make him easy prey for the Trump campaign.

Biden, though not particularly exciting, seems a much safer bet. For a vast majority of Democrats, defeat of Trump, well, trumps, all other policy considerations.

We will have to wait until November to see if they made the right call.

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Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders addresses supporters during a campaign rally in Denver, Colorado, February 16, 2020.

PHOTO: AFP

substantial part of the Democratic electorate. It was backed by specific radical policy prescriptions.

Bernie supporters, stand tall and be proud.

once said there are two kinds of politics—transnational and transformational.

Several decades down, Biden or former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton may

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW
(1856-1950)

Irish comic dramatist, literary critic, and socialist propagandist.

Both optimists and pessimists contribute to society. The optimist invents the aeroplane, the pessimist the parachute.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Photo collection

6 Sign after Virgo

11 Baseball's Pee Wee

12 Basketball's Shaquille

13 Enter, as data

14 "The Duke"

15 Burden

17 A bunch

18 Called up

20 "Get- witting"

22 Strange

23 Pop's pop

26 Police ID

28 Seafood garnish

29 Dubai, e.g.

31 Near-eternity

32 Steamed

33 Hay bundle

34 Perp pursuers

36 Warring god

38 Entertain

40 Curacao's neighbor

43 Partners

44 Long lunches

45 Iron

46 Chop-house order

DOWN

1 Place of refuge

2 Spike of film

3 Known to be true

4 Putting to work

5 Bill of fare

6 Near the ground

7 Queued up

8 To a very great

9 Crazy talk

10 Pub pints

16 Knight's title

18 Lounge attire

19 Genesis name

21 Account

23 Bike part

24 Swimming spot

25 Poet Sexton

27 Takes in at the box office

30 Hot brew

33 Floppy cap

34 Scout's base

35 Poet Khayyam

37 Cheering cries

39 Snaky shape

41 Big snake

42 Demand

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BABY BLUES

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