

The changing face of Bangladeshi diaspora

Young leaders emerge from Bangladeshi communities abroad to bring their pandemic plight to light



TANVEER AHMED

THE aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic may bring out a new generation of leaders among the expatriate Bangladeshi communities.

This assertion was made by Ripon Ray, founder of the BritBanglaCovid project, which shares the experiences of Bangalees living in Britain during Covid-19. Ray interviewed Bangladeshis primarily living in London, and also in other parts of Britain, with the aim of chronicling their experiences during the pandemic.

Bangladeshis were among the most affected ethnic groups in Britain, with a mortality rate that was three times higher than that of the general population. While the mortality among other ethnic groups—such as people from Caribbean backgrounds—steadily declined in the latter waves, deaths in the Bangladeshi community continued to be among the highest. A Bangladeshi male was five times more likely to die of the coronavirus disease during the second and third waves, compared to the wider British population. Doctors' groups in the United Kingdom have also warned that the pandemic risks entrenching long-standing racial inequalities disproportionately affecting Bangladeshi communities.

This has given rise to a new generation of leadership within the community—voices like Ripon Ray who are sensitised to the vulnerabilities of their community and their relative invisibility to Western governments. Ray's report, tabled before local governments, outlined how language services had steadily declined. This affected the messaging around vaccine uptake and the importance of safety measures like social distancing. Those over the age of 60 years were especially affected.

There was also the realisation that the written word was not always an effective

way for wider reach due to many having no formal education. In future campaigns around public health or other crises, community leaders argued that there was a need to integrate oral communication on a larger scale, such as telephone or face-to-face conversations.

Similar trends were visible in the United States, especially in New York, where Bangladeshis were hit hard by the pandemic. Despite occupying the lowest socioeconomic groups, they are counted among the broad group of Asians, which includes all sorts of nationalities. Indians, for example, occupy the highest socioeconomic category, but are counted with Bangladeshis in New York. The need for a stronger representative voice is spurring a new generation of leaders in response there as well.

"We see the South Asian data and we know it's mostly us, and the city needs to acknowledge that," said Mounmita Ahmed to the Gotham Gazette. Ahmed is a Bangladeshi-American activist from Queens who ran for local government. "Bangladeshis need to understand the data so the people in the community can take measures and precautions they need to take as a collective. We didn't get a chance to do that."

Much like London, specific targeting of the community through appropriate language resources was inadequate in New York. Bangla is the fourth most spoken language among



Despite such a large presence of Bangladeshis in London—and in the UK—their pandemic vulnerability has not received the attention it deserves. The photo was taken in East London, where a giant sculpture named BANGLA has been installed to commemorate 50 years of Bangladesh's independence.

PHOTO: ANSAR AHMED ULLAH

foreign-born New Yorkers, but did not receive focused attention. There was also a lack of anticipation that the higher rates of diabetes, greater employment in the physical economy, and lower rates of health insurance would leave the community vulnerable. Even the food distribution services failed to take into account the need for Halal produce, leaving many people hungry during Ramadan last year.

In my home city of Sydney in Australia, local activist Sabrin Farooqui has become a conduit between the government and sections of the Bangladeshi community.

Through her work with the Rohingya, she has been critical in the government releasing funding for asylum seekers, recognising that many of them worked in the black market cash economy and, as a result, they were not eligible for government grants. But this meant they were more likely to leave their premises in search of work, potentially endangering others. Farooqui is also a senior vice-president of Labor for Refugees NSW, a team that seeks a just and fair Labor Party policy on refugees and asylum seekers. The pandemic has been better controlled in Australia with relatively few deaths. Farooqui noted that the

greater focus on skilled migration in Australia meant that the local community had a higher proportion of highly educated, knowledge workers. Vaccine hesitancy among Australian-Bangladeshis, for example, has been low, unlike the trends internationally.

An aspect of Ripon Ray's work that raises some interesting implications is the fatalism around Bangladeshi communities he observed in Britain—especially among the elderly. He found that ill health and deaths were contributed to by the common attitude of having little agency in reducing the risk of death and disease. It was all up to God. This religious interpretation of predestination is familiar to all Bangladeshis, but it appeared to be especially damaging during the pandemic. This suggests that a new, younger generation of leaders will also drive some intergenerational tensions among the traditional, socially conservative Bangladeshi communities living overseas.

Ray's work has inspired further collaboration with King's College in partnership with the not-for-profit Swadhinata Trust. There are still fears that an imminent winter in the Northern Hemisphere may cost casualties in vulnerable communities where public health messaging is lax.

Regardless of where the diaspora lives, there is a broader regret about the greater distance it has engendered with their homeland. The inability to see or visit relatives has built a greater distance. The common practices of combining weddings and funerals with return visits to Bangladesh have also stalled, possibly changing such rituals in the longer run. The diaspora identity and its relationship with Bangladesh may have fundamentally changed.

But the trends identified above suggest that the tragedies experienced among Bangladeshis have energised and politicised a new generation. It may bode well for greater engagement within the Western governments in future. This is long overdue.

Dr Tanveer Ahmed is an Australia-based psychiatrist.

Bangladeshis were among the most Covid-affected ethnic groups in Britain, with a mortality rate three times higher than that of the general population.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

A coup attempt at the IMF



JOSEPH E STIGLITZ

MOVES are afoot to replace or at least greatly weaken Kristalina Georgieva, managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since 2019. This is the same Georgieva whose excellent response to the Covid-19

pandemic quickly provided funds to keep countries afloat and to address the health crisis, and who successfully advocated for a USD 650 billion issuance of IMF "money" (special drawing rights, or SDRs), so essential for low- and middle-income countries' recovery. Moreover, she has positioned the IMF to take a global leadership role in responding to the existential crisis of climate change.

For all of these actions, Georgieva should be applauded. So, what is the problem? And who is behind the effort to discredit and oust her?

The problem is a report that the World Bank commissioned from the law firm WilmerHale, concerning the bank's annual Doing Business index, which ranks countries according to the ease of opening and operating commercial firms. The report contains allegations—or, more accurately, "hints"—of improprieties involving China, Saudi Arabia, and Azerbaijan in the 2018 and 2020 indexes.

Georgieva has come under attack for the 2018 index, in which China was ranked 78th—the same position as the previous year. But there is an insinuation that it should have been lower and was left as part of a deal to secure Chinese support for the capital increase that the bank was then seeking. Georgieva was the World Bank's chief executive officer at the time.

The one positive outcome of the episode may be the termination of the index. A

quarter of a century ago, when I was chief economist of the World Bank and Doing Business was published by a separate division, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), I thought it was a terrible product. Countries received good ratings for low corporate taxes and weak labour regulations. The numbers were always squishy, with small changes in the data having potentially large effects on the rankings. Countries were inevitably upset when seemingly arbitrary decisions caused

done (and occasionally had to do when I was chief economist): urge those working for me to be sure that their numbers were right, or as accurate as possible, given the inherent limitations on data.

Shanta Devarajan, the head of the unit overseeing Doing Business who reported directly to Georgieva in 2018, insists that he never was pressured to change the data or results. The bank's staff did exactly as Georgieva instructed and rechecked the

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characterised as a hatchet job, what's the motive? There are, not surprisingly, some who are unhappy at the direction the IMF has taken under Georgieva's leadership. Some think it should stick to its knitting, and not concern itself with climate change. Some dislike the progressive shift, with less emphasis on austerity, more on poverty and development, and greater awareness of the limits of markets.

Many financial market players are unhappy that the IMF seems not to be acting as forcefully as a credit collector. In the Argentine debt restructuring that began in 2020, the IMF showed clearly the limits on what the country could pay: that is, how much debt was sustainable. Because many private creditors wanted the country to pay more than was sustainable, this simple act changed the bargaining framework.

Then, too, there are long-standing institutional rivalries between the IMF and the World Bank, heightened now by the debate about who should manage a proposed new fund for "recycling" the newly issued SDRs from the advanced economies to poorer countries.

One can add to this mix the isolationist strand of American politics—embodied by Malpass, a Trump appointee—combined with a desire to undermine President Joe Biden by creating one more problem for an administration facing so many other challenges. And then there are the normal personality conflicts.

But political intrigue and bureaucratic rivalry are the last things the world needs at a time when the pandemic and its economic fallout have left many countries facing debt crises. Now more than ever, the world needs Georgieva's steady hand at the IMF.

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Kristalina Georgieva.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

them to slide in the rankings.

Having read the WilmerHale report, having talked directly to key people involved, and knowing the whole process, the investigation appears to me to be a hatchet job. Georgieva acted in an entirely professional way throughout, doing exactly what I would have

numbers, making minuscule changes that led to a slight upward revision.

The WilmerHale report itself is curious in many ways. It leaves the impression that there was a quid pro quo: The World Bank was attempting to raise capital and offered improved rankings to help get it. But China

was the most enthusiastic backer of the capital increase; it was the United States under President Donald Trump that was dragging its feet. If the objective had been to ensure the capital increase, the best way of doing so would have been to lower China's ranking.

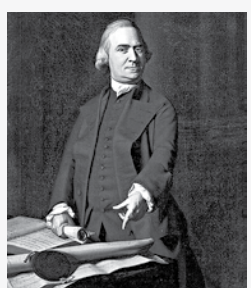
The report also fails to explain why it doesn't include the full testimony of the one person—Devarajan—with first-hand knowledge of what Georgieva said. "I spent hours telling my side of the story to the World Bank's lawyers, who included only half of what I told them," Devarajan has said. Instead, the report proceeds largely on the basis of innuendo.

The real scandal is the WilmerHale report itself, including how David Malpass, the World Bank president, escapes unscathed. The report notes another episode—an attempt to upgrade Saudi Arabia in the 2020 Doing Business index—but concludes that the bank's leadership had nothing to do with what had happened. Malpass would go to Saudi Arabia touting its reforms on the basis of Doing Business just a year after Saudi security officials murdered and dismembered journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

He who plays the piper, it seems, calls the tune. Fortunately, investigative journalism has uncovered far worse behaviour, including an unvarnished attempt by Malpass to change the methodology of Doing Business to move China down in the rankings.

If the WilmerHale report is at best

QUOTABLE Quote



SAMUEL ADAMS
Founding Father of the USA (1722 – 1803)

It does not take a majority to prevail... but rather an irate, tireless minority, keen on setting brushfires of freedom in the minds of men.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Goes angling
 - 7 Bond component
 - 11 Concert extra
 - 12 Albacore, e.g.
 - 13 Colorful flower
 - 14 Grove growth
 - 15 Hold up
 - 17 Umbrella parts
 - 20 Aisle walker
 - 23 Aussie runner
 - 24 South-western capital
 - 26 For each
 - 27 Top
 - 28 Opening
 - 29 Was behind
 - 31 Dos predecessor
 - 32 Gibson garnish
 - 33 Some primates
 - 34 Baking spice
 - 37 Pesters
 - 39 Flowering shrub
 - 43 Sad
 - 44 Rap sheet list
 - 45 Swiss peaks
 - 46 December mall workers
- DOWN**
- 1 Nourished
 - 2 One-million
 - 3 Univ. or acad.
 - 4 Cargo spots
 - 5 Lake near Buffalo
 - 6 Theater unit
 - 7 Duds
 - 8 Appearing
 - 9 Binary digit
 - 10 West of films
 - 16 Home
 - 17 Copy for pasteup
 - 18 Clarifying phrase
 - 19 Feverish
 - 21 Keaton of film
 - 22 Trade shows
 - 24 Sow
 - 25 Batter's goal
 - 30 Contemptible people
 - 33 Once more
 - 35 Travel aids
 - 36 Poet pound
 - 37 Court org.
 - 38 Everyone
 - 40 Auction buy
 - 41 Pitching number
 - 42 Cart puller

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT