

What makes us the seventh saddest nation?



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KAMAL AHMED

THE lead headline in this newspaper on July 4 reminded us of the arrival of an austere time, but another story inside was even more depressing, telling us that, according to the Global Emotions Report 2022, Bangladesh is the seventh saddest nation in the world. And we became miserable well before the onset of high inflation and cost of living crisis. How was it possible? Haven't we got dozens of occasions round the year to celebrate – some religious, some cultural, and many more political? Or are we about to hear that some quarters opposed to the government and its world-class development have been conspiring against us? The Global Emotions Report, however, is not produced by any of the opposition parties, including the BNP, or any human rights groups. It is a report by the global polling giant Gallup, constructed as part of its annual survey on people's emotional well-being.

In its quest for assessing the emotional state of people and what contributes to their happiness or unhappiness, Gallup asks hundreds of thousands of people in 122 countries questions about both positive and negative emotions. Think about how you felt yesterday. Did you smile or laugh a lot? Did you learn or do something interesting? Were you angry? Sad? It also asks whether someone was treated with respect, felt well-rested, or suffered from stress. Gallup asks people to imagine a ladder, with the lowest rung representing the worst possible life and the highest rung representing the best possible life. People rate where they stand today and where they expect to stand in three years. Based on how they respond, Gallup classifies them as thriving, struggling, or suffering.

According to this index, we are not thriving, not even struggling, but are

suffering. Every resident of Dhaka knows well how much stress one has to cope with just to survive every day. They don't need the Economist Intelligence Unit to tell them that their capital is the seventh least liveable city in the world. Its pollution level, air quality, noise, availability of clean water, traffic jams – all rank among the worst. Unless someone is a superhuman having supreme patience, it is quite natural that people would forget to smile, and become angry and sad all the time.

Though the world is suffering from war, inflation, and a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, Jon Clifton, the global managing partner of Gallup, said the global rise of unhappiness started long before any of those issues made headlines. In fact, unhappiness has been rising for a decade, he said in the report. And the report identifies five significant contributors to the rise of global unhappiness: Poverty, bad communities, hunger, loneliness, and the scarcity of good work. Economists have long been saying that inequalities are rising alarmingly because of our growth strategy, which has not created as many quality jobs as it should have. And the Covid pandemic has worsened it further, increasing poverty and hunger. And now, rising inflation and a prolonged war would certainly be bringing in further distress and despair.

Another part of the study has produced the World Happiness Report for the United Nations focusing on different variables, such as income, health, and social support. Could that have a different result that can cheer us up? The World Happiness Report, which has used statistical analysis to determine the world's happiest countries, concluded that Finland retained its standing as the happiest country in the world for the fifth consecutive year. To determine the world's happiest country, researchers analysed comprehensive Gallup polling data from 149 countries for the past three years, specifically monitoring performance in six particular categories: Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make your own life choices, generosity of the general population, and perceptions of

internal and external corruption levels. Unfortunately, these results won't cheer you up either as Bangladesh ranked 94th on the list. We know that our government attaches the highest importance to making our country a high-growth economy, raising per capita GDP, and graduating to a developing country. So, where do we stand after

in conflicts. One critical element of the study shows that Bangladesh has done equally badly in both the Positive Experience Index and the Negative Experience Index. In the Positive Experience Index, the 10 lowest-scoring countries include our neighbours Nepal and India, along with Egypt, Tunisia, Ukraine, and Georgia. But their scores in



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PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

a decade-long pursuit for economic prosperity and well-being of the people? Besides GDP and life expectancy, among other things, Gallup questions included, "Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?" and "Is corruption widespread throughout the government/businesses in this country or not?" Would one be mistaken in drawing the conclusion that lack of freedom and widespread corruption, both in public and private sectors, are the reasons that keep us stuck in the lower rankings of global indices? Other nations faring as badly as ours in the ranking of sadness or unhappiness are mostly known to be entangled

the Negative Experience Index are not so poor. The authors of the report claim that higher scores in the Positive Experience Index indicate that positive emotions are more pervasive in a country. These scores strongly relate to people's perceptions of their living standards, personal freedoms and the presence of social networks. On the contrary, in the Negative Experience Index, the higher the score, the more pervasive negative emotions are in a country. People's experiences with health problems and their ability to afford food are predictive of higher negative scores. Reading such analyses would surely make one even sadder.

Salma Khan: A mind without fear and a head held high



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

MILIA ALI

TODAY I have set out to write one of my most difficult columns. Difficult, because I am writing about a person who is so intimately entwined in my existence that it will be hard to separate myself from her larger-than-life persona. This is a humble tribute to my late aunt, Salma Khan (lovingly known to the family as Situ), who passed away last week.

Before I recount my aunt's multiple contributions and achievements, it may be appropriate to touch upon her challenging childhood.

Situ was merely a toddler when her father prematurely passed away. Her world suddenly shifted from security to uncertainty, the future turning into a question mark. But her mother – my grandmother – took up the difficult task of raising and educating her seven children with great fortitude. Situ grew up under the aegis of a matriarch who never cowed under pressure and did not differentiate between her four sons and three daughters. The unconstrained and liberal environment at home proved ideal for a talented woman like Salma to navigate the rapids of life with utter confidence, ability, and a belief in herself.

Salma Khan's many accomplishments cannot be encapsulated in a single column, but let me highlight the important ones. Although she herself was comfortably placed in the social structure, Salma was a feminist. She invariably stepped out of her comfort zone and walked the extra mile with the less fortunate. Whether it was fighting for equal rights of female workers or rallying against the domestic violence that women are subjected to – she left her footprint by challenging the many injustices and inequities. In the process, she raised public awareness and helped reshape our social and political consciousness, especially towards women.

As a member of the Planning Commission, she was instrumental in mainstreaming gender issues in the macro framework of the country's Five-Year Plans. She was always unafraid to act; I closely observed her in meetings where



Salma Khan (1942-2022)

PHOTO: COLLECTED

she took on a horde of men resisting her ideas. Apart from exceptional courage, her greatest quality was that she did her homework and articulated her viewpoints forcefully and persuasively.

Her attributes were recognised at international forums. She became the founder chairperson of NGO Coalition on Beijing Process (NCBP), a network of 624 NGOs working towards the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. She distinguished herself as the first Asian chairperson of the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Having worked in the CEDAW Committee for over 12 years, she left her mark in the UN human rights system. As the ambassador to Indonesia, Salma Khan demonstrated to the international community that women in Bangladesh could rise to the highest levels, not only in politics, but also in the government sector.

In her book *The Fifty Percent: Women in Development and Policy in Bangladesh*, Salma Khan gave visibility to the invisible by exposing the exclusion of women from development activities. Her research revealed that, despite being in a disadvantaged socioeconomic situation, and contrary to patriarchal beliefs, women contribute substantially to the economy. She thus inspired women to "act" for their rights, rather than be passive dissenters.

My narrative about Situ would remain incomplete if I did not write about the woman she was. Recently, while a few

of us were in the middle of a discussion on how to be a "real woman," a female friend commented, "I am so confused trying to decide whether to be a Betty Crocker and bake cakes or a Virginia Woolf and work toward women's emancipation." Although the remark was made flippantly, I immediately thought of my aunt Salma, for she was the first woman who taught me that there was no need to make these choices. Real emancipation of a woman lies in forging her own path professionally, socially, and in her personal life. Salma Khan was a good wife (to her extremely supportive husband, Habibullah Khan), a loving mother, a dutiful daughter, a loyal friend, a doting grandmother, and also an excellent professional. Her household chemistry was so well-balanced that her mother and mother-in-law lived with her, under the same roof, in perfect harmony. She believed in strong family ties and made special efforts to lend support to her near and dear ones whenever they needed her. I will never forget that when I was going through a difficult transition in my life, she arrived at my doorstep in remote Yerevan in Armenia to give me moral strength. There are countless

ways she helped her relatives, friends, and domestic help – most of which will perhaps remain unknown. My aunt was the first to tell me about Prof Yunus' work in Grameen Bank and how the programme's income-generating activities empowered women. She made me aware about Brac schools and their impact on girls' education long before I joined the World Bank as an education specialist. This knowledge inspired me to approach development work with passion, not just as a profession. And every time I feel the urge to protest against some inequity or injustice, I remember how Situ implanted a seed that helped me understand how important it is to enable the voices of the disempowered to be heard. Salma Khan sparked a dynamic change with long-lasting implications in many lives. For my cousins and I, she was an aunt, a second mother, and a friend. But above all, she was the wind beneath our wings – as I hope she will be for many young women of the new generation. Wherever you are Situ, you will always make the champak trees bloom. Rest in peace under their fragrant canopy.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

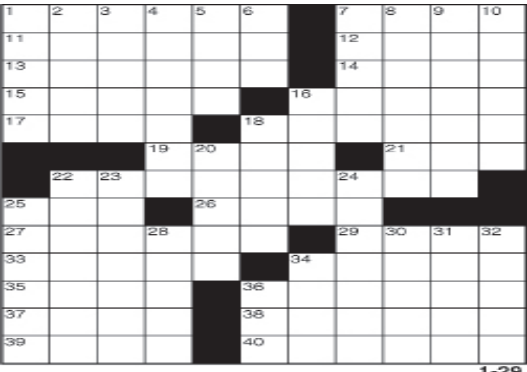
ACROSS

- 1 Music award
- 7 Rough shacks
- 11 Save
- 12 Hand or foot
- 13 Certify
- 14 Layered mineral
- 15 Subatomic particles
- 16 Overly confident
- 17 Frau's spouse
- 18 King of music
- 19 Galley needs
- 21 Roulette bet
- 22 "Blinding Lights" singer
- 25 Dove call
- 26 Forest plant
- 27 Alters, as a skirt
- 29 They may

DOWN

- 1 Plot out
- 2 Fix a loose lace
- 3 Silents star
- 4 1984 Wimbledon winner
- 5 Disarrange
- 6 So far
- 7 Comic's forte

- 8 Tapestry subject
- 9 Amused
- 10 Didn't budge
- 16 Bank robber's advance man
- 18 Move furtively
- 20 Terrible
- 22 Pedicure target
- 23 Hockey team's advantage
- 24 Patella
- 25 Writer
- 28 Pak
- 28 Store events
- 30 Drain cover
- 31 Lubricated
- 32 Some coasters
- 34 Game with mallets
- 36 Writer
- Stanislaw



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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