

The cooling conundrum



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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ONE of the first “culprits” of energy leakage identified during the first week of the government’s austerity drive was air conditioners. A section of the press listed the government offices that have installed over 1,000 tonnes of air conditioners and are paying crores of taka in annual electricity bills. The report did not mention the cooling capacity required for the floor spaces of the offices concerned, and thereby provides an incomplete picture. The general tenor croons an argument against the luxury of public officials. I will not be surprised if those journalists were writing their reports sitting in their centrally air-conditioned corporate offices – worse even, writing from a room fitted with a 30-year-old cooler machine that is known for guzzling up the electricity. After all, keeping cool at a time when the mercury rises is more than a matter of luxury or comfort; it is a necessity.

The problem is deeper than this sectoral air-conditioner-bashing for the sake of saving energy. The problem is even bigger than the artificially orchestrated energy crisis during the Russia-Ukraine war. The problem is even bigger than the question of affordability. For us, the problem lies in the sweltering July heat, when an unusual heat wave is making its presence felt in a season that the calendar says is monsoon. One doesn’t need a Scandinavian teenager to announce that climate change is here. I wish the reporters dug a little deeper into the problem and focused on the horrible truth that involves a feedback loop: “Warmer temperatures lead to more air-conditioning; more air-conditioning leads to warmer temperatures.” I wish they had mentioned the urban building spree

that necessitated the “load-building” for electric appliances. And once we realise our role in the creation of the feedback loop, we will realise that the solution lies not in setting the air conditioner at 26 degrees Celsius or wearing smart casual clothes.

As the world gets hotter, at a consumer level, buying an air conditioner is a natural individual response for those who can afford these power-hungry appliances. We need to understand why the air conditioner sellers are advertising lucrative offers on energy-saving and financial payment schemes to buy their products in instalments. What they will not tell us is the fact that their products release gas refrigerant R-22 and HCFC (hydrochlorofluorocarbon) into the air, causing ozone depletion. The more the heat becomes unbearable, the more prone we will be to buying an air-conditioning device. The cooler I try to stay inside my room, the hotter my surroundings (as my monthly utility bill) will become.

They say, on average, a small unit of air conditioner cooling a single room consumes more power than running four refrigerators. A central unit cooling system in an average flat uses more power than 15 refrigerators. According to an analyst at the International Energy Agency (IEA), during a heat wave in Beijing in 2018, air-conditioners consumed 50 percent of power capacity.

The growing necessity for cooling appliances all over the world will likely increase the current figure of one billion single-room air-conditioning units to 4.5 billion units by 2050. And air conditioners are going to be as pervasive as mobile phones. “The IEA projects that as the rest of the world reaches similar levels, air-conditioning will

use about 13 percent of all electricity worldwide, and produce two billion tonnes of CO₂ a year – about the same amount as India, the world’s third-largest emitter, produces today” (*The Guardian*, August 29, 2019).

In the post-World War II US, the consumer demand for air-conditioning has been helped by the industries behind the great

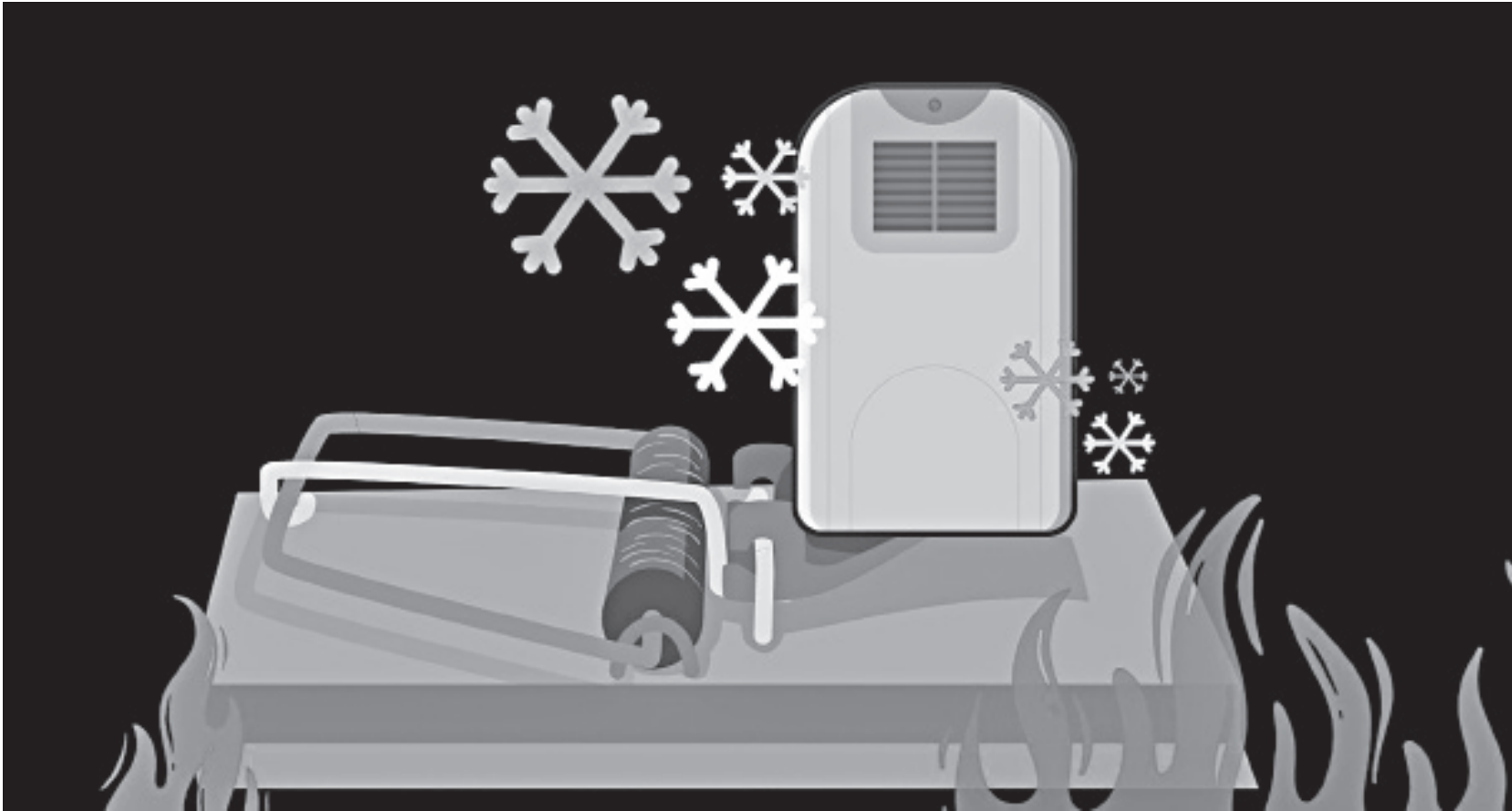
Institute of Architects wrote in 1973, by the brute application of more air conditioning.” Historian Gail Cooper wrote, “Architects, builders and bankers accepted air-conditioning first, and consumers were faced with a *fait accompli* that they merely had to ratify.”

As our economy is getting stronger, we are seeing a similar

building,” which will make us rely more on the countries that produce energy.

Our architects followed the footprints of their Western mentors in designing buildings, which are not sustainable for our climate. Why do we need a sealed tower in a country that is blessed with six seasons? Why can’t I open the window of a

buildings through its Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system, pursued by the US Green Building Council (USGBC) in 2000. In Bangladesh, the Housing and Building Research Institute developed the Recommendations for Green Building Code, 2012 and the proposed Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC), which are



post-war housing boom. To address the housing needs, architects in the US went for vertical growth. For both hot and cold weather, air-conditioning provided a quick solution. Air-conditioning proved essential for the 31 million new homes constructed between 1946 and 1965. They ignored the climate concerns with a mentality that “just about any problems caused by hot climates, cheap building materials, shoddy design or poor city planning could be overcome, as the American

boom in our real estate construction. But I think our designers and policymakers have done us a huge disservice by not learning from the mistakes of the West; they replicated the model for us that contributed to “the air-conditioning trap.” Our construction companies, electric manufacturers and policymakers have willingly or unwittingly ensured that air-conditioning remains an integral part of our physical growth. The electricity needed for the appliances adds to the “load-

tall building where I can use cross-ventilation? In Bangladesh, we don’t need the insulation of a cold country or the heat shields of a desert. We need buildings with materials that can breathe and absorb less heat. Instead, we are copying designs found on the internet to raise buildings that trap heat.

The West learnt from its mistakes and pursued sustainable architecture. For instance, the goal is evident in its efforts to improve the environmental performance of

beginning to give much-needed attention to energy consumption and climate impact. But what to do with the many impractical buildings fitted with these cooling devices that are detrimental to both our environment and our exchequer? It’s not only the government buildings that we should worry about. The crisis has allowed us to reflect on the situation and think of the entire industry that contributes to the feedback loop.

The drama around Hero Alom exposes our classism



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THE first Bangla song my sister and I learnt was Aha aji e boshonte, ato phul photo. We were two years old. My mother taught us that song, taped it for my grandparents, and sent it to them. My shushil grandparents loved it, happy that my mother was raising cultured children, in line with middle-class sensibilities that centred a secular Bangalee-Muslim identity.

Hero Alom was sent a legal notice for misrepresenting Rabindra Sangeet a few days ago. On July 27, the Detective Branch (DB) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) summoned him to interrogate him in lieu of “cyber allegations” made against him. According to *The Daily Star* report titled “DB Interrogates

Hero Alom,” he was questioned about distorting songs, including those of Rabindranath Tagore. Alom was released after assuring the police that he would refrain from such activities (presumably by getting voice lessons?).

And therein lies the question: Who are the police to police Rabindra Sangeet? But my first thought was, wait – if Hero Alom was summoned by the Detective Branch, whose responsibilities have clearly expanded to policing cultural products, are we all at risk? Because that recorded version of *Aha aji e boshonte*, I am certain, is on par with Hero Alom’s – barely in tune and “rap-like.”

I joke, but this is serious. The state actors who are responsible for keeping

communities safe (with guns, no less) are now at the helm of keeping us safe from ostensibly badly sung songs by those we hold in high regard – although that, too, is a matter of taste and preference. In an era wherein anyone can produce content, where the markets decide what is good and what is not, as demonstrated by their monetary and click commitments, what does it mean to have the police come down on a single content producer simply because it grates on hegemonic middle-class sensibilities?

It means middle-class membership is not merely economic – it is cultural. And lest we forget, anyone who defies the cultural norms set by a bygone era of middle-class educated elites must be reprimanded. It means Hero Alom may (or may not) have economic capital, but he does not have the social and cultural capital that one must have to be *allowed* to sing Tagore’s songs. They are only to be sung by representatives of middle-class secular families who had *ostad*jis at home, those who know how to sing his songs with reverence of a particular kind. Some argue Hero Alom should not sing at all, because he cannot sing, perhaps

because he has not been trained. But when the internet is full of Bangla singers who sing what they want, in any manner that they wish, it is clear when only one is singled out. When that someone is a stranger to the regular milieu of people who sing Tagore songs, even the police are on alert. They are on alert because he is an ordinary man who has somehow been able to find a voice. He has a following. And because he is a part of the uncoded, under-known working classes, he is dangerous. What if he gets out of hand?

Such outrage about culture makes one question the thinness of said culture. If one’s culture can be so easily eroded, perhaps it is worth being destroyed? If it is so easy to disturb the sensibilities of a nation, perhaps those sensibilities are not sophisticated. I joke (again), because we know it’s not about culture. It is about who gets to be the spokespersons of our culture. Our classist sensibilities cannot handle a Hero Alom singing Tagore songs and getting attention for it. If no one listened, he would have been safe.

Which is funny, because under capitalism, when citizens have been

turned to consumers, to dictate what is good and what is not makes zero sense. When the state supports a market-based capitalist society in which consumer choice, as measured by what they consume, is ostensibly the clearest indicator of quality, to clamp down on a popular “bad” singer for singing badly makes me slightly hopeful. Does this mean the state actually sees that the markets are unable to produce social goods? That the markets actually accentuate inequity? Are we now moving towards the end of late-stage capitalism, end of the indignities and inequities that mark the current sociopolitical economy?

No. Not so fast. Just like they made an example out of Shahidul Alam to let people know what to expect if they tarnish the image of this nation, a different, more grandiose-sounding Alom is now being scapegoated to send another message to the people. The message is: There is no room for experimentation and creativity unless it is supported by large global corporations, to which they (we) are beholden for economic and image-related reasons.

But that is exactly what Tagore did *not* have in mind. According to Shayan Chowdhury Arnob, who is the producer of Coke Studio Bangla, the corporation that is *allowed* to experiment with Bangla music, and a graduate from Rabindranath Tagore’s Visva-Bharati University, Tagore had created two schools: One that would follow his written word and sing exactly as he prescribed, and one in which they could experiment. Indeed, Tagore *wanted* people to respond to his work, not simply regurgitate it. However, Navine Murshid, political scientist and my sister who is currently working on Tagore, points out that he configured middle-class sensibilities through his songs, which have been used to civilise and govern citizens and citizenship. I offer, that is exactly how Hero Alom is being civilised, not simply by civilising social norms, but by the use of state powers.

That Hero Alom emerged from the police station saying, “I was merely told to create good content, not to stop singing,” probably says much more about how governance works than anything else.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 View obscurers

6 Soup servings

11 Still alive in a paintball battle

12 Look forward to

13 River to Lyons

14 Mouth setting

15 Scoundrel

16 Razor target

18 Boxing great

19 Melancholy

20 Tick off

21 Longings

23 Wherewithal

25 Chiding sound

27 Skill

28 Break the rules

30 Restaurant VIP

33 Opponent

34 A thou thou

36 Running bird

37 Mating time

39 Signing need

40 Be of use

41 Tony, for one

43 Start a set

44 Smith's place

45 Little kids

46 Like oxen

DOWN

1 Tennis star

2 Take a drag

3 Wild guess

4 Mint container

5 Worries

6 "I wouldn't do that..."

7 Has debts

8 Easy task

9 Soda buys

10 Unadorned

17 Deli choice

22 Be litigious

24 Pendulum path

26 Mexican snacks

28 Get across

29 Director

31 Come into view

32 Backed

33 Banquet

35 Like salad greens

38 Hand over

42 Court

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