

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Climate costs could sink us

We need good governance to implement projects that will protect coastal districts

THE fact that extreme weather events are increasingly growing worse in Bangladesh is obvious from our climate experiences from this year alone. In June, heavy rainfall, flash floods and excessive water flow from upstream rivers affected an estimated 7.2 million people in the north-east. Yet, this was followed up with a searing heat wave, where the average maximum temperature for the month of August was a three decade high. This, along with the delay in the actual rainy season, meant that planting seasons were affected, and there are growing worries that food security will be threatened as a result.

Unfortunately, a new report from the World Bank signals this might only be the beginning. According to the report, because of climate change, cyclone-induced flooding could cause damages worth USD 570 million across coastal areas. This is not a one off event – the report suggests that it will occur every year in future. It analysed the effects of rising sea levels on coastal districts, and found that some upazilas could go under as much as 8 metres (26 feet) of water as a result of floods if there is a sea level rise of half a metre. Depending on how severe the floods are, the damage could amount to as much as USD 21 billion.

The severity of this situation cannot be in any way understated. Not only will it have devastating impacts on livelihoods, farmlands, roads, and critical infrastructure; it will push saline water further into tidal channels, threatening agricultural production, water supplies, and the diversity of coastal ecosystems. The recent events in Pakistan, where more than 14,000 people have died, millions have been left homeless and an economic crisis has gripped the country, shows just how much danger we are facing.

Last month, it was reported that Bangladesh requires USD 230 billion by 2030 to implement the National Action Plan on climate change, but we urgently require international and bilateral support. While we urge the authorities to do everything to raise these funds, we must equally stress on the importance of using them with accountability and transparency. The corruption and irregularities in climate projects have been reported in this daily over the years, with a report finding, only last month, that the managing director of the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust has been collecting “donations” in exchange for releasing cheques to the projects under the trust.

The World Bank report’s analysis of coastal resilience projects also found a lack of maintenance as a significant challenge. In this, as in so many public projects, it is clear that a lack of good governance is hampering our progress. If we are to receive adequate funds, and eventually compensation from responsible countries for the loss and damage climate change has inflicted upon us, this has to change.

Even the law can’t protect Dhaka’s heritage!

Authorities must save what’s left of Boro Katra, others

SURELY, development is more than the building of new structures while tearing down those with history and character? Yet, that is exactly what we continue to witness happening in Bangladesh, and most noticeably in Old Dhaka. Most recently, a section of the ancient Boro Katra, comprising three chambers of the historic structure, has been all but torn down. But this is apparently no news, even to the authorities concerned.

This daily reported on the rampant encroachment on ancient structures in Old Dhaka earlier this year, while the conservation organisation Urban Study Group (USG) alerted police in July of how parts of Boro Katra were being demolished. Yet, the historically significant site is being turned into rubble by its “owner,” Ali Hossain of Holding 15, Boro Katra Lane. Alarmingly, this is taking place despite a High Court directive in 2018 ordering the authorities to “stop changing, modifying and demolishing 2,200 British-era buildings named in the USG’s list of heritage sites in Old Dhaka.” Boro Katra is also at the second position on Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipakkha’s (Rajuk) list of historical buildings that require conservation. And, as recently as in 2020, Rajuk declared Boro Katra and Chhoto Katra as “Traditional Special Establishments.”

Owner Ali Hossain’s claim that the structure was being demolished after the city corporation deemed it risky and after permission was obtained from Rajuk to construct a multi-storey building on the site. This was found to be untrue when this newspaper contacted the director of Rajuk Zone 5, who denied providing such a permission. However, question remains as to why the authorities could not stop Ali Hossain from demolishing this historical site, despite having been informed of the threat it was in. Given that the responsibility of conserving such sites falls largely on the Department of Archaeology, their response has been lukewarm at best, limited only to warning the owner months ago and never following up on the state of the structure again. Now, they have said they will “inspect the relevant papers.” It is disappointing to see how neglectful the police and the Department of Archaeology have been regarding their duty to protect Boro Katra and Chhoto Katra.

Just last month, we voiced our astonishment in this column when a century-old two-storey structure in Bangla Bazar was being demolished, only a month after the same happened to Neelam Ghar. These, too, have been done in violation of the law and only for the benefit of the owners who usually have the backing of local political heavyweights.

Dhaka has a glorious past just as any ancient city, and it is most prominently embodied by its architecture. We urge the government to ensure that the authorities tasked with protecting our heritage are actually doing their job. We must not hand over our future generations a city that has lost its ornamented past in its chase for futile development.

THE ARREST OF PRITOM DAS

When the state defeats its people



Shamsuddoza Sajen is a journalist and researcher.

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

THE draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) strikes again, and most worryingly, in collusion with communal bigotry. This time, police arrested Pritom Das, a leader of left-leaning organisation Rashtra Sangskar Andolan, on September 9 in a case filed under the DSA for allegedly hurting religious sentiments. The case was filed by Mahbub Alam Bhuiyan, an activist of Bangladesh Chhatra League, on September 4. He accused Pritom of hurting religious sentiments and undermining the country’s sovereignty through a Facebook post.

Let’s see what that post was. Published on July 8, 2022, the post reads, “Someone asked Saadat Hasan Manto, the great Urdu story writer, how is your country? He replied, ‘Just like the Friday prayers in jail. A fraudulent inmate offers the call to prayer, the imam is a murderer, and the worshippers are all thieves.’” (The original post was in Bangla).

The same quote was used by historian Prof Muntasir Mamun in an online article published the previous day, and by M Naser Rahman, son of former finance minister M Saifur

Since the Ramu attack a decade ago, communal violence has been carried out again and again, following the same formula of raising false allegations of demeaning religion through Facebook posts.

Rahman and a former member of parliament from Moulvibazar 2 constituency, on July 28. However, they were not sued for using the quote.

Dear readers, did you find anything offensive to religion and state sovereignty in Pritom Das’ post? It shouldn’t hurt anyone except frauds, murderers and thieves. Religion never condones bigotry, and the sovereignty of a state is created and sustained by the consent of its people, not by the government or the law enforcement agencies loyal to them.

Manto, in his short life of 42 years, faced such allegations several times; therefore, he can explain the motive behind these accusations better than anyone: “When these leaders cry their

allegations of insulting Islam against Pritom. He made a social media post demanding that Pritom be brought under the law. His followers jumped into spreading the word.

The next day, a protest was brought out from a local mosque under the banner of “Sreemangalar Dharmapran Muslim Janata,” and they demanded Pritom Das’ immediate arrest. An ultimatum was

and this feat of Sreemangal’s people was widely celebrated.

Unfortunately, the defeated forces struck back by weaponising the Digital Security Act. This time, the local police acted over-enthusiastically. Pritom Das is now languishing in jail. The vaguely worded law on digital security has created its own moral brigade, and, unsurprisingly, the ruling party activists are leading it. They feel entitled



Pritom Das’ Facebook post containing Manto’s quote has turned out to be distressingly prophetic.

VISUAL: STAR

hearts out telling people that religion is in danger, there’s no reality to it. Religion is not something that can be endangered. If there is a danger, it is to these leaders who endanger religion to achieve their own ends.”

Now, let’s look at the background events leading to the arrest of Pritom Das. It will help understand Manto’s insight.

On August 27, as Pritom and his comrades were staging a protest in Sreemangal’s Chaumohana Chatter in solidarity with the tea workers’ demand for a daily wage of Tk 300, a group of 56-60 activists of the ruling party led by the former general secretary of Sreemangal municipal unit of Chhatra League, Abed Hossain, attacked Pritom’s group in the police’s presence. Police, however, played the role of a silent spectator. Pritom and his nine comrades were injured in the incident. On that afternoon, they held a press conference condemning the attack and demanded immediate arrest of the perpetrators, including Abed Hossain. They also blamed police inaction for the incident. The attack was widely criticised on both online and offline platforms. So far, the police haven’t taken any action against the attackers.

Three days later, 52 days after the appearance of the Facebook post, the same Abed Hossain brought

issued that if he were not arrested before the Jummah prayer of September 2, protest marches would be brought out from all the local mosques. They also called upon local Muslims to join the protest. It created huge panic among the local Hindu population.

Isn’t this the same old script? Since the Ramu attack a decade ago, communal violence has been carried out again and again, following the same formula of raising false allegations of demeaning religion through Facebook posts. This is also not new that political, social and religious influencers and groups with vested interests are the masterminds behind communal attacks. In Rangpur’s Pirganj upazila, for example, a local Chhatra League leader, along with his accomplices, instigated the mob to burn down homes and shops of the local Hindu community on October 17, 2021 over a doctored Facebook post.

However, this time their plan didn’t work out. The local people, particularly religious leaders, didn’t walk into their trap. Most importantly, Pritom Das stood strong and didn’t give in to the demand for seeking an apology. The united stand against communal provocation showed the path of resistance to the abuse of religious sentiments by political opportunists,

to enforce their parochial interest as morality, and that has created a new political dispensation which mandates an atmosphere of violence and fear.

The role of the local administration is no less frustrating. If not complicit in the crime, they played into the hands of the communal bigots. In the case of Jhuman Das, they failed in the same way. Instead of taking action against the Hefazat activists and supporters who attacked and vandalised the houses of minorities in Shalla, Sunamganj, they implicated local youth Jhuman Das in a DSA case, who warned in a Facebook post that the hate speech preached by the Hefazat leaders would disrupt communal harmony in the area. He suffered in jail for over six months before being released on bail by the High Court in September 2021. He was arrested again on August 30 this year in another flimsy DSA case. The government has devised a unique formula for tackling communal tension: arrest the victim to calm down the perpetrators! Doesn’t it constitute a defeat of the people by the government, which has no legitimacy without their popular will?

Pritom Das’ Facebook post containing Manto’s quote has turned out to be distressingly prophetic in the present context of Bangladesh. Shouldn’t we be worried about it?

Bangladesh can be the global lab for climate solutions



POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Dr Saleemul Huq is director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).

SALEEMUL HUQ

OVER the last 50 years, Bangladesh has been recognised in South Asia as well as around the world as a laboratory for development success in alleviating poverty, girls’ education and inclusion in the workforce, and unlocking the potential of the private sector in banking, industries and commerce, among others.

This development was by no means perfect, particularly when it comes to protecting the environment, which was badly neglected, and also with regard to inclusive development where the divide between the richest and the poorest citizens has been getting worse. So, looking at the development pathway for the next few decades, we need to rectify these two major flaws in our development pathway to become more environment-friendly as well as more equitable in the benefits of development investments.

At the same time, in the next 50 years, we will have to deal with a new major global emergency called

human-induced climate change, which will cause severe stress to our development investments. So we will need to incorporate measures to tackle climate change to our development pathways if we wish to prosper in the coming decades.

Let me share some ideas on ways in which Bangladesh can become a global laboratory for climate change solutions in the future.

The first recommendation is to expedite the pace and quantum of investments in tackling climate change in all our development investments, both in different ministries in the government and, perhaps even more importantly, in the private sector and civil society. This is already happening. There are a number of national plans that are being developed to achieve this goal, including the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), the National Adaptation Plan (NAP), and the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP). Now these plans must be folded into the main national planning

process with a priority for the Ninth Five-Year Plan (9FYP), which will be developed soon. Mainstreaming climate change activities such as mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage is now essential for the 9FYP.

The second recommendation to focus on is building the capacity of our young citizens, with a priority on educating girls, to make them climate-literate citizens and indeed mould them into future climate champions. Investing in our youth is the single most lucrative measure in terms of value for money over a decade or so. This should become a major priority for us immediately. Bangladesh needs to look to transformational ways forward, rather than incremental ways only. Investing in today’s youth will lead to the transformation of the country tomorrow.

Another aspect of tackling climate change, in which Bangladesh is already a globally acknowledged leader, is Locally Led Adaptation (LLA), where the country is investing in vulnerable communities to enable them to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change that is already happening. This now needs to be made into location-specific LLA for each different ecosystem – from coastal zones to the hill tracts, to haor areas, to the Barind Tract, to urban areas.

This location specific Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EBA) combined with LLA can be developed for different

ecosystems, and that learning can be shared with other countries where they have similar ecosystems. This knowledge can be shared both with other vulnerable developing countries and with developed countries. Knowledge of how to tackle climate change is a global asset; so developed countries can learn from Bangladesh.

Next, our private sector needs to accelerate their investments in mitigation measures, such as solar power, going from small scale to larger scale as rapidly as possible. At the same time, investments in adaptation are needed so that companies can make profits from supporting communities to adapt to the adverse impacts of human-induced climate change. This is still untapped potential where our dynamic private sector can also become global leaders and sell their knowledge to the rest of the world.

Finally, we need to invest in developing a national mechanism to tackle loss and damage from human-induced climate change, which is now a reality. Bangladesh has the opportunity to be the first mover and share with the world our learnings at local and national levels.

Our world has just now entered the era of loss and damage from human-induced climate change and each country will have to learn how to tackle the new and emerging situation. Bangladesh has the potential to become a global laboratory of climate actions and solutions going forward.