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Has Bangladesh become ‘a dual society’?



AN OPEN DIALOGUE
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Bangladesh is heading in a direction where we will soon see two different countries: one where the masses struggle to make ends meet and the other consisting of entrepreneurs, businessmen, and professional elite living in enclaves in big cities who frequently go overseas for vacations and shopping and live in a bubble in Gulshan, Banani, or Baridhara. Is that something we need to be concerned about? Not necessarily, because this trend is visible elsewhere and is probably the dynamic that is sustaining our economic growth.

As I was finishing up this article, I heard on the BBC World News headline (January 4, 2022) that even China, the last remaining bastion of an egalitarian society, has already become two countries, one for the rich and the other for the rest. There you go!

My recent trip to Bangladesh was a journey through many different ecosystems and societal formations of my country. As is inevitable, when you return to your birthplace, you experience many different emotions and each day takes you back to some historical milestones of the country. When I was crossing the recently inaugurated Padma Bridge, I remembered the ferry crossings the last time I went to Khulna only a few years ago as well as the travails we went through with a team of artists from Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA) trekking from Dhaka to Shelaidah just after independence between May 8 and 10, 1973, to celebrate Tagore's birthday.

On December 28, I witnessed the inaugural run of the metro rail in Dhaka on TV and joined my fellow countrymen in offering a toast to the latest symbol of our march to join the polity of middle-income nations. Besides these mega-projects, I also saw various other symbols of our socioeconomic growth and prosperity.

Equally, I also was frequently in close proximity with the traditional way of life and came face-to-face with the contrasts that exist between the middle class and the average wage-earners, and came across some dark spots that are still ever-present in the country. As they say, "There's always darkness under the

candle."

There is an abundance of wealth in pockets and for a segment of the upper crust of civil society commingling with the underlying sub-strata consisting of the populace who fight hunger and poor health. We saw the presence of financial hardships exacerbated by the recent bout of inflation, the grip of "bandhak" or usufructuary mortgage in rural areas, and the absence of decent healthcare services. In many ways, Bangladesh offers a kaleidoscope of divergent panoramas, both in terms of cultures and practices.

Among other things, I noticed load-shedding in Sylhet, the influence of "speed money" at every juncture, and the coexistence of the new and the traditional, and the "dual society". To quote Henry Settimba, "A dual society contains two worlds in one: the Third World and the First World coexist within the same nation, under the same authorities and the same flag. To a certain extent, this has always been the case, but the duality has become exacerbated and increasingly strident with the advance of globalisation."

In Jessore, we spent a couple of days in Banchte Shekha (Learning to Survive), an NGO whose rest house and dining hall always bring back some wonderful memories. We first met Angela Gomes, the founder of Banchte Shekha located in Arabpur many years ago when my wife stopped by with a group of American undergraduate students from Bridgewater State University (BSU) on a study tour. Gomes's vision for improving the quality of life for poor women and children was recognised internationally when she received the Magsaysay Award in 1999.

During our recent stay, Gomes candidly discussed her struggles and the challenges she still faces in working towards an equal society in an early morning one-on-one chat with my wife, who is an educator in the Department of Social Work at BSU. On the bright side, the trips to Sylhet, Kustia, Jessore, and the suburbs of Dhaka were almost seamless except for the occasional gridlock while in transit. We travelled to poet Lalon Shah's ashram in Kustia

within a few hours from Dhaka, whereas previously it took us almost a day, and enjoyed an evening of music and dance with Abdul Quddus Mridha, instructor of Lalon Academy, and his very talented group of artists including Shahid, Aashalata and Shireen.

On December 16, 2022, we paid a visit to my Dhaka College Bangla professor, Abdullah Abu Sayeed, another Magsaysay Award recipient, at his present classroom at the Biswa Shahitya Kendra. He, still as articulate and humorous as ever, retains his old charm and is as much a magician with words as we have always known him. He sounded a little downcast as he informed us that his mobile library project may be seeing the end of the day as funding from the government has dried up.

A word or two on the omnipresence of speed money. I first came face-to-face with this curse and how much it has permeated through the practices and mores of our society when I was told by a friend that I need to pay cash upfront to the press for media coverage of my planned book launch event at the Policy Research Institute (PRI) on December 22. Coincidentally, at the book launch event, AKM Abdullah, senior financial sector specialist at the World Bank, asked the chief guest, Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen, "How do you expect that foreign direct investment (FDI) would increase if investors have to overcome the barrier of speed money?"

Three parting snapshots. If you live in Dhaka, either in Gulshan, Banani or Baridhara, then within a mile or so of your building, you will find everything you need: the embassies, the supermarkets, hospitals, European-style food courts, "Michelin-rated" restaurants, boutiques and universities. To quote the New Yorker magazine which showcased a new community in the Big Apple, "Literally, you could spend morning to night here and never have to leave".

On December 16, I went to a "Victory Day Party" in the Gulshan showroom of TanaPoren (Warp and Weft), which is part NGO and part commercial enterprise. The sarees I saw were gorgeous and very expensive (upwards of Tk 1,00,000) but it appears that the weavers are receiving but a fraction of the final price, according to some weavers from Sonargaon whom we met there.

As Professor Abdullah Abu Sayeed reminded us when we visited him on Victory Day, this society will always have a chasm, and he used the example of the rickshaw puller who carries (or more accurately pulls) another fellow human being to make a living. "Our victory will be perfect when we cross this barrier," he said.

Living another year dangerously



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ANIS CHOWDHURY

2022 has been a year of great uncertainty when it seemed the world perilously reached the brink of self-destruction – be it human-induced climate change or military conflict. Welcoming 2022, we had enough reasons to be optimistic; but it was another "year of living dangerously" – *Tahun vivre pericoloso* in the words of Soekarno, or an *annus horribilis* in the words of the late Queen Elizabeth.

No end to Covid-19

The joy of the Covid vaccine discovery quickly vanished as the "vaccine apartheid" blatantly prioritised lives in rich nations, especially of the wealthy, over the "wretched of the earth", and corporate profit triumphed over people's lives. Meanwhile, Dr Anthony Fauci's sober warning of a more dangerous Covid variant emerging this winter may come to be true as China, the country of 1.4 billion, struggles to deal with the surge in cases since it has largely abandoned its unpopular "zero Covid" policy.

New cold war turns into proxy war

Whereas the global pandemic required extraordinary global unity, unfortunately, a "new cold war" quickly turned into a "hot war", bringing the world to the verge of a devastating nuclear war for the first time since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Russia, finding itself cornered by an expanding NATO, decided most foolishly to invade Ukraine, believing it could overrun the country without any resistance. While the heroic Ukrainians continue to defend their motherland, Russia seems to have become bogged down in a proxy war with NATO.

If the proxy war with Russia was not enough, the US is recklessly provoking China towards another "hot war", following Trump's trade war. Clearly the monopoly capital of the US and its military-industrial complex are pushing the US to a "Thucydides Trap." More than 60 years ago, President Eisenhower, in his farewell address to the nation, warned about the military-industrial complex, a formidable union of defence contractors and the armed forces. Eisenhower, a retired five-star Army general, who led the allies on D-Day, saw the military-industrial complex as a threat to democratic government and global peace. Alas, his dire warning fell on deaf ears.

Western hypocrisy exposed

The Russian invasion of Ukraine exposed Western pretence. The Western mainstream media unashamedly declared the dislocation of Ukrainians intolerable because the victims are blue-eyed, blond-haired Europeans, not "uncivilised" third world inhabitants or "barbaric" Arabs. Western duplicity is nowhere as blatant as it is in the case of the Palestinian plight. To them, Russia's occupation and annexation of parts of Ukraine is illegal; but Israel's occupation and annexation of Palestinian land as well as gross human rights violations are justified on various professed grounds, e.g., right to protection from "terrorist acts."

Leadership vacuum

The world now needs Eisenhower to resist the military-industrial complex; it needs Teddy Roosevelt to break monopoly capital's stranglehold and to protect consumers, workers and the environment; it needs Franklin Roosevelt to promote multilateralism and social justice; it needs Kennedy to defuse crises. At the height of the "old cold war," Kennedy ate humble pie by quietly removing the security threat to the USSR posed by offensive weapons (Jupiter MRBMs) deployed in Turkey, and publicly pledging that the US would never invade Cuba or attempt another Bay of Pigs operation. Eisenhower was magnanimous enough to bear the lion's share of financing the USSR's proposal for global efforts to eradicate smallpox – the leading cause of death and blindness then.

Alas, we see no such signs in a world of Trump, Biden, Johnson, Marcon and Scholz. Even "out of touch," billionaire Sunak does not inspire any hope, despite being the first coloured person of colonial

descent to occupy the 10 Downing Street. Sunak will probably try to prove himself holier than the Pope, instead of promoting the interest of former colonies or descendants of colonial subjects or downtrodden.

No better leadership in the South

The South is also devoid of visionaries, such as Nkrumah or Nehru who promoted non-alignment and Southern unity. Nehru's land is now overtaken by Modi's Hindutva movement, openly promoting violence against minorities. Unsurprisingly, Modi was in sync with Trump; but he equally cosies up to Biden professing to promote democracy and human rights. Sadly, Mandela's South Africa is mired in scandal after scandal.

Although many, including myself, eagerly looked forward to Lula's victory in Brazil, neither his return to power nor the so-called "second pink tide" in Latin America should make one overly joyous. The Left has demonstrated its propensity to fracture or implode easily, e.g., contributing to Correa's defeat in Ecuador, or aiding the Right to strike back in Peru. In Colombia, finance capital, mining giants and the elite have already ganged up on Petro's vow to tackle inequality with tax and land reforms and his proposed ban on new oil and gas exploration. Chile's Boric has faced setbacks including the rejection of a new constitution, forcing his concessions to the Centre-Right. Constitutional coup is a common strategy of the

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established vested interest.

Some inspirations down under

Down under, the Australians soundly defeated an increasingly autocratic and unaccountable conservative government in May. It was the government that implemented inhumane off-shore detention centres for people seeking to escape persecution and starvation in their own countries (about to be emulated by the UK Tory government). It also was cruel enough to pursue vulnerable people on social security payments with a robotic programme whilst cutting taxes for the wealthy and letting them evade tax. It was the government which created plumb jobs for the boys. It was the government which continued to deny climate science and refused to act.

Finally, the Australians got rid of it. Labour showed extraordinary discipline in opposition, and in government, it stood up to big business and vested interests. It has quickly moved to put in place the processes to: i) set up an independent anti-corruption body with real teeth; ii) recognise the voice of First Nations people; iii) respect human rights of asylum seekers languishing in detention centres; iv) address environmental degradation and achieve 43 percent emissions reduction target by 2030; v) restore labour rights, fair and decent wages; vi) review RBA's performance to ensure monetary policy serves broader national interest, not the finance; and vii) balance geo-political alliances.

Its progressive agenda is quite long. Let me end here, wishing the Australian Labour government success to inspire other nations – large and small, developed and developing; and with best wishes for you to be safe and remain healthy, even if not quite bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Honeydew, for one

6 Singer Cruz

11 Justice Kagan

12 Portents

13 Will Smith movie

15 Poker card

16 Wee bite

17 Spotted cube

18 Narrow passages

20 Galley item

21 Pay stub line

22 Short hit

23 Tibia settings

26 Pre-release software versions

27 Big book

28 Snoop grp.

29 Toddy base

30 Knotty craft

34 Lyric poem

35 One or more

36 Bud

37 Will Smith movie

40 Follow as a result

41 Hefty

42 Losing plans

43 Door sign

DOWN

1 Monument

20 Galley item

21 Pay stub line

22 Short hit

23 Tibia settings

26 Pre-release software versions

27 Big book

28 Snoop grp.

29 Toddy base

30 Knotty craft

34 Lyric poem

35 One or more

36 Bud

37 Will Smith movie

40 Follow as a result

41 Hefty

42 Losing plans

43 Door sign

9 Hoosier's home

10 States

14 Brad of "Fight Club"

19 Writer Rice

22 Den denizen

23 Caressed

24 Escape expert

25 Enormous

26 Two-wheeler

28 "Pretty please?"

30 Foals' mothers

31 Set off

32 Bart's mother

33 Clan leader

38 Stomach

39 Solo of "Star Wars"

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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT