

# Collective action can save us from a dystopian future

Twelve scholars, social entrepreneurs and advocates write about the International Panel for Social Progress (IPSP)’s new push to put social progress in the global centre stage.

The challenges of environmental degradation, social inequalities, democratic decline, disruptive technological innovation, and dysfunctions in global cooperation have never been more pressing. Pandemic, unjust wars, and extreme weather have threatened social cohesion and democratic institutions, revealed new vulnerabilities, and laid bare the weaknesses of prevailing development approaches and global governance. Addressing these challenges require new forms of coming-together to recognise the mutual interdependence of these challenges along with the diversity of local and national contexts, to fully grasp and unpack the complexity of systemic transformation and the timelines of ongoing dynamics on Earth and in societies. This is essential to imagine adequate solutions and to make the most of the emerging opportunities. We, representing a group of several hundred scholars, social entrepreneurs and advocates from across the globe, have come together as the new iteration of the International Panel for Social Progress (IPSP) to construct a vision that averts the looming dystopian future and drive a discourse that can put social progress in the global centre stage.

In 2018, the IPSP offered a general picture of the type of institutions and reforms which, by allowing substantial variations across the world, could inspire the advent of a society based on the values of equality, freedom, emancipation, participation, and inclusion. Such a perspective constituted a powerful narrative to support the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. However, there is a growing sense that the piecemeal or sectoral implementation of good public policies or that inspiring but isolated civil society initiatives do not suffice to counter the negative social, environmental and governance externalities produced by the current power structures and by the predominant forms of economic organisations. The clear identification of the



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main causes of these negative externalities is key to developing a design, a sequencing, and an implementation of actions that would transform the dynamics at play.

A broad outline for better societies exists. It includes: creating an inclusive and responsible economy by taming markets and corporations through responsible socioeconomic and environmental regulatory systems and by fostering economic and social organisations with a broader purpose; bringing circularity into our value chains and way of life; reducing social inequalities and empowering people through universal services and through pre- and re-distribution; deepening democracy through participatory and deliberative mechanisms and better information systems; enhancing global cooperation and reforming global governance to preserve common goods such as biodiversity and to improve resilience under global changes; and harnessing technology for positive impact.

While recognising that many of the solutions for better societies already exist,

the need of the hour is a renewed big push on a global scale, both at the level of ideas and actions, because progress has been decidedly mixed and new complexities and concerns have accentuated the challenge. There is an urgency of new coming-togethers adapted to local conditions, cast in long-term systemic visions and narratives of better futures, and co-constructed, promoted and implemented by fluid coalitions of public, private and non-governmental actors. The question that motivates us as the new iteration of the IPSP is how we can help coalitions of actors to emerge and to organise, and how we can help nurture them, to implement the social progress agenda.

In 2023, the IPSP, established 10 years ago, decided to reconvene, in a larger and more inclusive format, to continue its tradition of scientific objectivity and independent analysis, but now also to engage in co-construction with stakeholders and member-based organisations to ensure greater relevance of its work for change-makers, and thus aiming

at much greater impact. It will gather cross-sectoral and transdisciplinary expertise, from science and from practice, to provide a comprehensive, systemic understanding of the complex dynamics of multi-actor interactions, with a special attention devoted to the Global South and to underrepresented voices. Starting in 2024, it will work towards operationalising the social progress agenda as a new global horizon through developing innovative formats and tools to support change-makers and to impact processes leading to the transition. It will work towards designing reforms and transformations that address the structural flaws of current economic and social institutions and regulations as well as the biases of power realities while fostering the potential for social change by supporting dissemination of social innovations and rethinking our relationship with living organisms to respect the system of complex and dynamic interactions in which we live. An International Platform for Social Progress as a web source will be available later this year to crowdsource the transformative initiatives and projects throughout the world and to provide a guide to the most inspiring and most replicable ones. Intergenerational dimensions will be central to our work and younger generations will be mobilised through networking, and social media.

There will be many options and possibilities to join the IPSP and to contribute to its work: from the local to the global, from inner communities to larger networks, from civil society to the largest corporations, from city governments to supranational organisations, from education circles to the general and social media. Technology will help us translate, communicate, transfer knowledge, and connect change-makers. The diversity of contributors will match the diversity of users of the knowledge base developed by the IPSP.

The new big push by IPSP to put social progress in the global centre stage starts with six priority work streams: mapping of the

systemic interactions and power structures of societal challenges; measuring what we value; rethinking the information system as a public good in the age of social media and artificial intelligence; developing a framework for an ecological rule of law; defining performance for governments and businesses that reflects social progress; and identifying and promoting new pathways for global solidarity.

A dystopian future cannot be humanity’s destiny. Coalescing the individual and collective will for sustainable and cohesive pathways towards better societies has never been more urgent. The task is huge and success far from certain. But the responsibility is existential, and the challenge must be seized now by everyone, everywhere, all at once.

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## Rememebering an educationist, artist, and socialite from the yester generation



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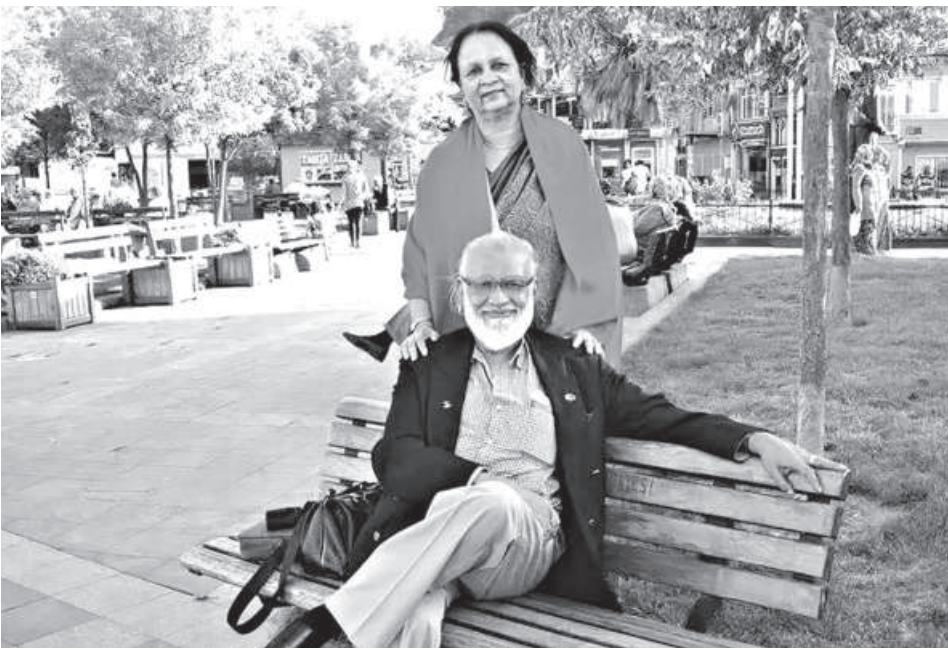
Asma Abbasi, who breathed her last on July 4, was a personality who epitomised values and a lifestyle that were modern and progressive enough to dwarf many of us from later generations. Born and having lived in a time when women having a career and active social life was frowned upon, she sailed gracefully in both, as an educationist and much-loved celebrity in social circles. From being a professor of Bangla to deftly anchoring education programmes, from being culturally active to engagement in multiple social outfits—her energy and enthusiasm were boundless. One of her remarkable traits was her incorrigible positivity and instant warmth that would make even a stranger feel at ease with her.

She was married to Mustafa Zaman Abbasi, a well-known singer, promoter, and researcher of folklore music who was the son of Abbasuddin Ahmed, the legendary Bengali folk song composer and singer. Coming from a traditional, conservative Sylheti family with her father being the principal of a Madrasa while being married to such a culturally enriched family must have been challenging for Asma Abbasi. But she blended in seamlessly by actively supporting the cultural heritage of her in-laws. Her two daughters delved into

creative fields: Samira Abbasi became a singer and Sharmini Abbasi a writer. Asma Abbasi, however, made sure that the core religious values and traditions remained strong within the family. She received education from the Islamic Centre, near their ancestral home in Purana Paltan.

When they were in their prime, the Abbasi couple was one of the most well known in Dhaka. While her husband has been a prolific singer and artist, Asma Abbasi was a well-known figure in most circles with the confidence to walk into any gatherings with poise and dignity. Her instant warmth would generate positive energy in the room. Never shy to take the stage, she would seize any opportunity to speak with her usual charm and ability to grab people’s attention. She was equally prolific in her literary work; books authored by her include Komola Ronger Dinguli (The Orange-Coloured Days), They Kon Bon er Horeen (From Which Forest is the Deer), and Hason Raja.

She received the gold medal award from the Ministry of Education as the best college teacher. As anchor of programmes on education and religion on BTV, she was well accepted by the audience when BTV used to be the only electronic media for information



Asma Abbasi with her husband, Mustafa Zaman Abbasi.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

and entertainment. She also did programmes for Radio Bangladesh. In addition, she served as a member of the Film Censor Board, Family Planning Board, and as advisor to Kochi-Kachar Mela (an organisation for children). Asma Abbasi was the longest serving cultural secretary of Ladies Club, one of the oldest and well-known social outfits for women of her generation. As member of Inner Wheel Club of Dhaka and District Chairman of Inner Wheel Bangladesh, she led social and philanthropic works in the community.

On a more personal note, Asma Abbasi was

the younger sister of my mother, late Najma Khasru, and they were among five siblings whose father was the late Maulvi Habibur Rahman Chaudhury, former principal of Sylhet (Govt.) Alia Madrasah and mother the late Syeda Hifzunnesa Khanam, sister of well-known literary figure Syed Mujtaba Ali. As Asma Abbasi’s nephew, I had the pleasure and privilege to enjoy her affection and be a witness to the childlike simplicity and candour that she had. Any of my friends she had met in our house would instantly become another nephew/niece and she would greet

them with the warmth of a favourite aunt. She would also go out of the way to make people happy, even at the trail stage of her life. She would cook by herself to send me her signature achari gosh (pickled beef curry), in spite of my repeated requests not to go through so much trouble as we lived in two different parts of the city.

After the last Qurbani Eid, she asked me to send her home-made sheek kabab. It was easier to do this when we used to live in an independent house in the picturesque Ispahani Colony and a little tricky in an apartment due to the need to have a stove that can burn charcoal. To satisfy her culinary desires, I bought a special stove to make the kebab at home and then sent it to her. A few days back she called me around midnight and before I could pick up the phone, it got disconnected. Since it was quite late, I wanted to call her back later, thinking that she must have been calling to thank me. I had no idea that the unanswered call would be the last call from her and in hindsight, I regret that I had not immediately call her back.

The lesson learned is that when people reach a certain point in their life, when every single day lived is a blessing to be counted and not life taken for granted—we should be vigilant to attend to them. When the time comes for our last phone call, last meal, last walk, last talk, last sunrise and sunset, last prayers—it is likely that we will know little of it beforehand and can only hope that our loved ones will be there as we make the transit from this world to the other. So, for those in the twilight years of their life, let no phone call from them be unattended or messages unanswered, and let them not be left alone. May Khala’s soul rest in peace.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS

1 Gum masses

5 Reduced amount

9 Homer classic

11 Pasta topping

12 Blackboard material

13 Inert gas

14 Sewing aid

15 Car parts

17 Stamp users

19 Maiden name label

20 Low card

21 Sleep spot

22 Country division

24 Dietary concern

26 Coped

29 Attach a patch

30 Sprees

32 Some fast-food chicken

34 Guy’s friend

35 Mexican farewell

36 Steer clear of

38 Gives for a time

39 Like the Capitol

40 Therefore

41 Hardy heroine

DOWN

1 Bits of smoke

2 In cahoots

3 Wiest of films

4 Was inactive

5 Cooking fat

6 Oregon city

7 Got a touchdown

8 Good judgment

10 Flaw

11 Lacking

16 Device for book lovers

18 Maid’s target

21 Abacus piece

23 Showed fear

24 Tributary

25 Storefront sight

27 Pea or peanut

28 Barters

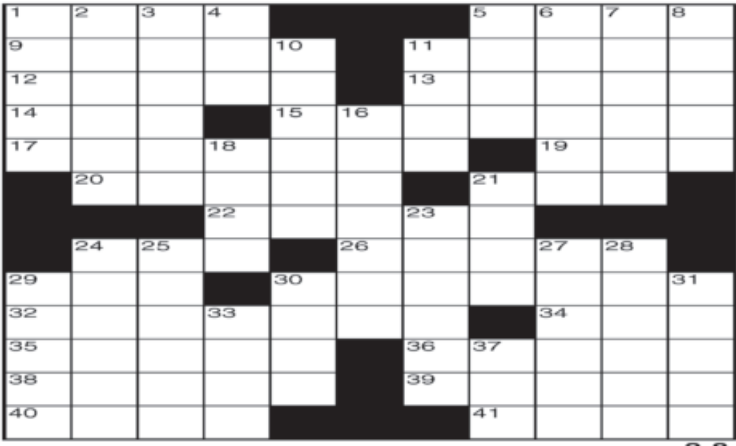
29 Hackneyed

30 Worgy’s love

31 Winter gliders

33 Ninny

37 Auction unit



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### SUNDAY’S ANSWERS

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