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RAIN OF LOVE, RAIN OF SORROW

Kalidas’s Meghdoot and Bangladesh’s monsoon reality

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It is not unusual for us to experience an intense sense of nostalgia and longing for our loved ones as the monsoon clouds roll in and the first raindrops touch the ground. Much like in Kalidas’s acclaimed Sanskrit poem “Meghdoot” where on the first day of the monsoon, Yaksha felt a desperate longing to reach his distant wife.

The myth follows Yaksha, who was banished by his master Kubera to the remote Ramgiri mountain for neglecting his duties, separated from his beloved wife. In yearning for her, Yaksha sees thick clouds drifting towards north on the first day of the month *Ashar* and appeals to a passing cloud to deliver a message to his wife in the faraway city of Alaka. Thus begins “Meghdoot”, with an imaginary dialogue between the Yaksha and the cloud.

Kalidas used clouds to symbolise Yaksha’s hope of sending a heartfelt message to his beloved. Aside from that, their majestic presence brings joy and relief to the people suffering from the scorching summer heat, emerging as their answered prayer and announcing long awaited rain.

But monsoon in Bangladesh contrasts this idyllic portrayal. While some indulge in weather demands like *khichuri* or fritters with a hot cup of tea, for others—working professionals, students, or those running errands—it’s a complete curse. Waterlogged streets, muddy footpaths, traffic jams, and high transport costs turn everyday tasks into a challenge. For those living in flood-prone areas near riverbanks, monsoon brings additional hardships. It becomes a period of survival, at least the recent floods in Sylhet hint so.

Which is why, although Kalidas associated monsoon clouds with concepts of nature and love, in Bangladesh, the arrival of the monsoon is now viewed with concerns because of the hardships it could cause.

Natural occurrences or debts to pay? Throughout history, monsoon in Bangladesh has been more than just a season of rain, it is a celebrated cultural experience influencing folk songs, festivals, and agricultural practices. Historically, successful monsoon brought abundance, while a failed or weak one could even trigger famine.

Monsoon in Bangladesh has become too complex to be simply termed a “natural disaster.” In recent years, it has posed increasing challenges, with Bangladesh ranking seventh on the 2021 Global Climate Risk Index, highlighting its vulnerability to climate devastation.

This predicament extends across South Asia, where scientists attribute these changes to the climate crisis, predicting stronger monsoons with more heavy rainfall ahead. But addressing these challenges requires moving beyond viewing the damages as purely natural occurrences, because that approach helps us avoid our accountability for the damages incurred. A study titled “Fourth National Climate Assessment”, published by the US Global Change Research Program provides compelling evidence that human activities, notably fossil fuel burning, are the primary factors behind warming trend across the globe that is affecting climate patterns.

Colonial mindset

When we mention human activity, it is essential to acknowledge the colonial mindset that emerged after post-British rule. During the British period, the rulers saw waterways, especially the delta’s changing rivers, as obstacles to management, taxation, and governance.

For over 200 years, urban development prioritised creating dry land by regulating waterways, filling up the rivers, canals, embankments, and other structures. They created maps and laws, like the Permanent Settlement Act, to clearly distinct land from water.

They constructed other infrastructure projects, to dominate the delta and increase profitability. Local influentials and natives also participated for their benefit. These actions normalised the alteration of the natural water-soaked ecology, leading people to forget and overlook the potential consequences.

Even after the British left, city and water management remained unchanged. The government continued building embankments and dams to control rivers, aiming to modernise the country. This infrastructure-focused approach overlooked the challenges of filling waterways, causing most of the monsoon struggles people experience now.

Now, the monsoon makes us wonder how the situation escalated, whereas we acknowledge that current approaches to managing water aren’t really effective.

Yet the obsession with West-defined “development” continues to promise us more unplanned infrastructure projects, often supported by international organisations. Such aims overshadow questions for what the climate needs and how cities in a monsoon-fed landscape should be designed.

Environment vs economy: Who is paying the price for these developments?

The recent floods in Sylhet serve as a relevant example of the impact of forced development. These floods are happening for many reasons. Located just below Cherrapunji, known as the wettest place on Earth, Sylhet is naturally prone to significant rain. But the last two years clearly suggest that human actions too are exacerbating the situation there.

In areas like Sylhet or Sunamganj, the lands used to be different: rivers were navigable, and there were fewer roads and structures. Now, floodwaters take more time to recede. Previously, swamps and sinkholes helped contain floodwaters, but this is no longer the case.

Because every region has a capacity limit for water absorption, when rainfall exceeds this limit, flooding occurs—which has become a regular fixture in Sylhet. The hilly terrain of Sylhet historically allowed rainwater to naturally flow down from high grounds. But unplanned development, including filling water bodies and rampant illegal hill-cutting disrupted this natural balance and exacerbated flood risks, while eroding the area’s geographical identity. Roads constructed across the Haor region impede water flow, while urban development prevents water from permeating the ground.

While flooding can be natural, waterlogging primarily stems from human errors and negligence. Unplanned infrastructure that fills up the waterways, leaving no natural pathways for water, makes for inadequate drainage systems, compounded by additional plastic pollution.

We cannot, anymore, imagine monsoon without waterlogging, especially in Dhaka, despite ongoing promises from local authorities to resolve the issue. Responsibility has shifted from WASA to the city corporations, with hundreds of crores spent on drainage projects. However, the heavy rainfall continues to cause severe waterlogging due to inadequate drainage systems, blocked catch pits, plastic pollution, and outdated infrastructure.

Even in Chattogram, moderate to heavy rainfall is enough to inundate residential areas, main roads, lanes, and by-lanes across both the old and new parts of the city, notably because of defiance of a 1995 drainage master plan, hasty project implementations without feasibility studies, and the filling of 70 percent of water bodies for construction purposes and more.

Landslides in Bangladesh from 2000 to 2022 have caused 727 deaths, including 54 children, and 1,017 injuries. Historical records of landslide events indicate an average of 19 landslides annually in the country, with a four percent increase each year.

The never-ending saga of the Teesta treaty

The management of international rivers like Teesta and Ganga, particularly the opening of the Farakka and Teesta barrage gates during heavy rains and upstream water flow from India, has caused ongoing damages and hardships for the people of Bangladesh. These rivers are governed by the United Nations’ International River Convention of 1997, which establishes rules for their shared use.

According to Article 7.2 of the convention, if significant harm is caused to another watercourse state, the state responsible must consult with the affected state, taking effective measures to eliminate or mitigate the harm. This includes discussing compensation where appropriate. Bangladesh retains the right to seek compensation for damages resulting from upstream projects affecting these rivers.

But each time, hopes for progress on the Teesta treaty are dashed by West Bengal’s objections and India’s extensive irrigation use of Teesta’s water, similarly to the Ganges and the Farakka barrage.

Many believe that negotiation with India could be pivotal—a collaborative approach to managing shared rivers rather than unilateral diversions. However, decolonising the idea of development should be taken seriously as well. This involves rethinking infrastructure priorities, emphasising highly on the waterways and their natural flow, focusing on resilient and sustainable solutions, investing in robust drainage systems capable of handling monsoon deluges and providing early warning systems to mitigate disaster risks. Moreover, safeguarding vulnerable communities living in flood-prone areas and ensuring their shelter and safety must be prioritised in urban planning and development.

As we revel in the cozy comforts of a monsoon at home, we experience a modern interpretation of Kalidas’s poetic vision. In “Meghdoot”, clouds conveyed messages of love. But today, our clouds carry concerns about the severity of each year’s monsoon. What we often term as “development” can backfire when the rains arrive, leading to flooded streets, precarious landslides, and a reminder that our monsoon has become more about survival than celebration.

Getting out of the abyss of moral depravity



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We are living in a society where corruption is rampant, pervasive, and institutionalised. The organisational structure of any institution should make it impossible for corruption of massive proportions to go undetected or continue unhindered without the knowledge of the higher echelons, unless they too are complicit in the crime and benefits from the loot. Unfortunately, that appears to be the case with the unravelling of illicit wealth amassed by some of the top echelons of the state machinery.

In Bangladesh, we are witnessing white-collar thugs who abused their power and position and allegedly committed crimes of all sorts and magnitude including intimidation, extortion, embezzlement, insider-trading, illegal occupation and possession of lands to become superrich overnight. Their reported accumulation of illicit wealth and illegal exercise of power dwarfs that of even Al Capone.

The questions that arises are—what were the public institutions or departments, where these thugs worked, doing when these crimes were being committed. Similarly, where were the agencies, responsible for monitoring monetary transactions? Also, what roles did the central banking authority and Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) play while billions were being laundered, which the Global Financial Integrity (GFI) terms as Illicit Financial Flow (IFF). The interesting thing is while overseas organisations keep figures of IFF from Bangladesh, our own agencies or authorities remain

and his family had already fled the country. ACC’s actions remind us of the English grammar lessons in schools: “the doctor arrived after the patient had died.” It also raises the obvious question why the ACC didn’t institute the same proceedings against Benazir, rather made it possible for him to pass through the border check post manned by the very force that he had commanded once. On the other hand, many people are detained or refused clearance to embark on their outward journey on flimsy grounds.

Returning to Matur’s case, it is alleged that a very influential cartel facilitated the former revenue boss’s safe passage out of the country. The drama doesn’t seem to have ended yet with some reports saying that Matur hasn’t fled but is hiding in the country. Interestingly, his companion in corruption—his wife—is boasting with shameless pride that they have managed powerful media and power centres and nothing would happen to them. She is correct to an extent that law in the country never gets hold of the wealthy and powerful no matter what illegal, illicit or immoral actions they take. The fact is: an unholy nexus of unlawful cartels, regulators, politicians, and bureaucrats exercise such ruthless power and influence that the interests of the state and that of the people become secondary to theirs. Their triumph is visible but none dares to point it out because “justice” is long dead.

The nation is in hibernation and unlikely to wake up soon because the rot has gone on for so long and so deep that it has infested the entire social system, losing its strength to take measures to clear the mess it has gathered over time. The most concerning factor is not the money lost through corruption but the fact that it is leading us to a hopeless future. The prevailing perversions are damaging, and are creating an unhealthy social structure. Young people are helplessly witnessing crimes in high offices and how the criminals remain immune from prosecution. The statutory institutions are becoming weak putting democracy in jeopardy. Honesty and integrity are being replaced by insatiable greed and debauchery. Different branches of the state are failing to uphold and discharge their respective functions. Finally, meritorious youths are getting frustrated at the prevailing state of affairs and leaving the country in droves. Only the half-educated, mediocre and illiterates are left behind to run the country.

The devastatingly falling standard of our tertiary education is a major contributing factor to the abyss of moral depravity. The shameless sycophancy in academia and the failure to nurture and cherish meritocracy is creating an atmosphere where learning is becoming absent and earning money has become the main objective for students. I am not aware of any nation apart from ours which permits student politics of the kind and nature, that dominates our educational institutions. Students in other countries aspire to become responsible members of the society and contribute to its development and prosperity. They don’t have the time or leisure to indulge in activities that are fraught with corruption and servility to power.

It is time we ask ourselves the most pertinent question of our time—whether we want to see ourselves as a failed state or should we bury all our ills and work towards building a nation dreamt by Bangabandhu and the millions who shed their blood and dignity to liberate the country and gifted us a free and sovereign nation. We certainly don’t want to leave a failed nation for our children. It is about time and absolutely imperative that the nation mustered all its strength to rise and shake itself off the mud and filth it has accumulated thus far. It is not going to be easy to come out of the unflathomable quagmire of corruption and moral turpitude, but if we start the hard work now, a new generation will rise to pull the country out of its misery.

In Bangladesh, we are witnessing white-collar thugs who abused their power and position and allegedly committed crimes of all sorts and magnitude including intimidation, extortion, embezzlement, insider-trading, illegal occupation and possession of lands to become superrich overnight. Their reported accumulation of illicit wealth and illegal exercise of power dwarfs that of even Al Capone.

oblivious to it, therefore, raising suspicion of their complicity in the crimes. GFI, the Washington-based think tank on illicit financial flows, corruption, illicit trade, and money laundering had reported that a struggling economy like Bangladesh lost an astonishing sum of \$61.6 billion during the period 2005-2014 in outward illicit financial flow or money laundering. The outward IFF is alleged to have spiked since then, as a result of which the economy of the country has been further crippled and the foreign reserve has depleted from over \$48 billion in August 2021 to \$12.8 billion in net reserve in April 2024. The country is now in a serious crisis to meet its import payments which impacts its foreign trade and balance of payment. The resultant upward surge in inflation has brought misery to the lives of the common people.

Meanwhile the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which is too weak, too compromised, and too scared, is failing to effectively prosecute the Al Capones of Bangladesh. Even the criminal justice system is not faring any better. Thus, the Al Capones often manage to obtain a safe passage to countries where they can stash their illicit money and properties.

This perhaps explains why Benazir could leave the country and Matur could flee despite the massive allegations of corruption. The case of Matur is even more amusing. On June 24, the ACC went to court seeking an order to bar him and his family from leaving the country after, but according to news reports, Matur