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FROM THE EDITOR

This issue of JBS addresses what may be referred to as forays into the soul of a nation: its all-encompassing environment. The reader is presented with a compendium of authoritative views on various environmental matters to suggest how Bangladesh ought to prioritize its options to ultimately deliver environmental justice. Importantly, I hope this issue will bring a modicum of realization to key stakeholders that when a nation's soul is destroyed, in slow but sure steps, willfully or otherwise, it assuredly destroys what the soul inhabits — humanity in its diversity, culture, harmony with nature, livelihoods, aspirations, and much more.

Environmental degradation is reflected in various human activities that harm nature (the damming of rivers to reclaim land for construction, dumping toxic waste in waterbodies, air pollution from coal-fired power plants and brickfields, etc.). Often such activities place the aspirations of one group of people in direct conflict with another (clean air vs. need for electricity; clean water vs. dyeing operations in the RMG trade) and raise the specter of whose worldview will have the final say and whose must be sacrificed. Consciously or sub-consciously, embedded in the discourse is the interplay between the perspectives of a functionalist society which is problem-oriented in nature and directed at providing solutions to practical problems and a radical humanism perspective of the Young Hegelians — Marx, Feuerbach, Lukacs, Gramsci — concerned with “seeking to reveal society for what it is, to unmask its essence . . . and to lay the foundation for human emancipation through deep-seated social change” (Burrell and Morgan 1985 p.284).

Whether this tussle between different interest groups should end up in a zero-sum game or whether alternative outcomes can be envisaged is something researchers and academics ought to contemplate further. Not only is this important at the national level; such matters constantly come up in international affairs also. For example, according to Schoenbaum (1992), “The GATT is under attack by some in the environmental community who charge that international free trade blindly fosters the exploitation of natural resources. The GATT is depicted as a sinister charter that allows ‘big business’ a free hand to plunder the bounty of the natural world.” Some environmentalists

insist how free trade has led to destroying the environment, including threats to certain species. Schoenbaum indicates how environmentalist lobbyist have joined together to disrupt free trade in its present avatar.

If the problem emerges as a power game, continuing conflict can dissipate much intellectual, emotional and physical energy with neither side backing down. Such conflict can be protracted and debilitating. Thus, instead of a zero-sum approach, perhaps the need of the day is to involve various stakeholders and invoke the need to negotiate an optimal outcome.

Banning two-stroke engine vehicles and re-imposing a ban on plastic bags is certainly desirable: but what of the vested interests? Can the enactment of various environmental laws devise alternative modes of sustenance for those who anticipate being displaced? The 2019 high court verdict that “A river is a living entity, a legal person and a juristic person,” is a clear need of the day: no question. But what of those (leather and garment industry) who have few alternatives within a reasonable cost framework? Can some arrangements (including viable locations and technological solutions such as wastewater treatment) be negotiated so that their operations can continue profitably and unhindered? The coal-fired power plant in Bagerhat, Khulna, threatens the Sundarbans and it would be a shame to lose, over time, the mangroves and the protection it affords to various entities. Yet, power demand has been growing in leaps and bounds as the nation marches from lower middle-income status to higher aspirations. Could some alternatives be devised by domestic and international environmentalists in concert with other major stakeholders? The Rooppur nuclear power-plant also raises similar questions — of costs and benefits: who pays, who benefits?

In the arcane world of politics, where the environment is a political hotbed (unfortunately), saving face is a huge issue, especially when egos of key stakeholders are embroiled. Under the circumstances, the question is whether it is better to have behind-the-door negotiations within some give-and-take framework among the feuding parties instead of staking out claims and counter claims in public, proving each other wrong, and propagating one's point-of-view in no uncertain terms as widely as possi-

ble. Also important is instead of seeing several matters — trade liberalization, jobs and economic growth, climate change, carbon sequestration, preservation of species — as separate issues, could they be brought together in one forum to examine and explore the benefits and costs for the human race?

I do not pretend to have answers; I merely seek to explore possible alternate scenarios in the constant struggle that I term “the clash of interests.” My point here is to stress that it is not important to win a battle here and there but to win the war . . . for humanity! That means safeguarding the environment, a major source of human sustenance, especially within our fragile ecosystem, while looking out for jobs and economic growth. When ideas clash and interests diverge, it is important to disengage from the battle of egos and transition to another paradigm — the exchange of wisdom — to safeguard the human species. It also entails not just figuring out “what” we need to do but also “how” to approach the vexing problems. I believe the human race must become better at negotiating its future instead of succumbing to baser instincts of power, politics, ego, and who wins today.

Congratulations are due to our *special editor*, Ahmed Badruzzaman, for taking literal pains to put together this illuminating collection of essays for JBS. Thanks are also due to the authors for making a strong case for protecting the soul of the nation, actually the soul of the planet. It is likely that the struggle will continue between the profiteers and the planet-preservers. Let us hope that research, the generation of new knowledge, a rational perspective, and concern for humanity will prevail to avert a doom that is hard to envisage.

Syed S. Andaleeb
Editor in Chief

Schoenbaum, T. J. (1992). Free International Trade and Protection of the Environment: Irreconcilable Conflict? *American Journal of International Law*, 86, 4 (October), 700-727. Published online by Cambridge University Press: 27 February 2017.

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FROM THE SPECIAL EDITOR

The idea of this special volume of the JBS on Bangladesh environmental issues arose following the 20th Anniversary celebration of the formation of the Bangladesh Environmental Network (BEN) in July 2018. In its 20 years, BEN a global network of Bangladeshi diaspora (<http://ben-global.net>) has attempted to help redress the myriad environmental challenges that Bangladesh faces as the country's economy grows. BEN has done its work through projects, fruitful dialog with successive governments irrespective of political affiliation, research-based position papers, in-country international conferences, and activism in collaboration with partners on the ground, such as the Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA).

The six papers in this special volume provide only a glimpse into this multi-faceted effort. The reader will note an underlying vein through all six papers—preservation of rivers and water bodies of Bangladesh is closely related to saving the country's environment, and the need for all to be cognizant of this as economic growth is pursued. We hope that the reader will also notice a common thread across the papers weaving the message of the UN's sustainable development goals (SDG's): a developing country with a fragile ecosystem can simultaneously strive for a sustainable economic growth and responsible environmental safeguards.

The first paper, *Bangladesh Environment Movement — Achievements and Challenges*, by Nazrul Islam, provides an overview of the history, successes and challenges of the movement. The paper starts with a brief tutorial on the theory behind the environmental movement contained in two concepts. One involves the dynamic relation that exists between the level of economic development and the quality of the environment in a country. The second concept is the postulation that pollution level initially increases with economic growth and then declines after a country achieves a high level of growth. This theory can help navigate the environmental journey and inform policy decisions. The author then walks the reader through the formation of the environmental movement in Bangladesh, its onward journey, its partnership with successive governments leading to policy successes, such as the ban on Two-stroke Engine Vehicles, re-imposition of

the ban on plastic bags, and the enactment of various pro-environmental laws. The author also notes the inevitable divergences that tend to arise with policy makers resulting in challenges in getting policy directives fully implemented, for example, those on river protection that BAPA/ BEN faced, and how the movement has striven to overcome such challenges. The author highlights the salient features of the successful and resilient environmental movement. These include collaboration between Bangladeshis resident in the country and those in the diaspora, as well as the movement's distinctive feature of financial self-reliance that has prevented vested-interests from influencing it and preserved its politically non-partisan character.

The second paper, *Endangered Delta and the People's Movement for Its Survival*, by Sharif Jamil, illustrates one of the major challenges the first paper talks about. The author analyzes the state of the country's river systems and associated wetland. These areas form a vital source of life and livelihood in the Bengal Delta, the world's largest active delta. The author analyzes the threats Bangladesh's rivers systems face from river-grabbing by powerful interests, mega industrial projects being implemented, construction of structures often on rivers, and almost unmitigated dumping of industrial waste into the streams and rivers. One example of a mega industrial project is the Rampal Coal Power Plant being built in the vicinity of the Sundarbans, with limited or no appropriate environmental impact assessment. The author notes the people's movements that have grown in various parts of the country to protect her rivers and wetlands, and the success they have achieved. He highlights both beneficial partnerships with certain government entities to safeguard the rivers, as well as hindrances placed by other governmental entities in this effort. The author notes the very laudatory role courts in Bangladesh have played in attempting to beat back the assault underway on the country's water systems, including the 2019 high court verdict that declared, "A river is a living entity, a legal person and a juristic person," and poses the question, 'will the court's decision be implemented and that too in a timely manner?'

The third paper, *A Critical Look at the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for Rampal Power Plant*, by

Wahida Rashid, uses the standard norms utilized in writing and reviewing EIAs for public projects in the US to examine the Rampal EIA that the Bangladesh government used to approve the project. The Rampal project, also noted in Jamil's paper above, is a coal-fired power plant under construction in Bagerhat, Khulna, in very close proximity of the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest and a UNESCO World Heritage site. The project has been opposed by domestic and international environmentalists, including BEN and BAPA, but the plant remains under construction. The author finds the Rampal EIA lacking in multiple aspects and recommends a more complete EIA using international standards. Several of the issues raised in Rashid's assessment are similar to the objections UNESCO has raised in opposing the Rampal project, which threatens the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the Sundarbans and its inscription on the World Heritage List. The OUV denotes the exceptional cultural or natural significance of a site that transcends national boundaries, making it of 'common importance for present and future generations of all humanity,' and thus accords it the necessary protection through the inscription.

The fourth paper, *Underlying Causes of Early Floods in the Haor Region*, by Md. Khalequzzaman, examines the unprecedented floods that occurred in four districts in Bangladesh in the haors (vast wetlands) in 2017, in late March and early April and a somewhat smaller but still a large flood in 2019 in the same period. The author uses publicly available 100-yr rainfall data from Sunamganj and the adjacent Meghalaya State of India to make a prediction of increased rainfall in April, compatible with reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. He warns that the flooding is being compounded by multiple factors, such as reduced carrying capacity of Bangladesh's rivers due to human interference and infrastructure building on them, and the resulting siltation that Jamil's paper above described. The author reiterates the value of haors in the Bangladesh economy and ecosystem. He recommends steps to increase the carrying capacity of rivers, starting with collection of modern digital data to better understand the flow patterns of the rivers and wetlands, and then develop suitable plans to manage the country's water systems, especially in the haor regions.

The fifth paper, *Sedimentation Rates Versus Sea-level Rise at the Bangladesh Coast*, by Dipen Bhattacharya, illustrates the importance of understanding whether the sedimentation rate can counter the accelerated sea-level rise due to the rapid climate change initiated in the 20th century. Based on his own and others' research on the effect of sea-level rise on the Bangladesh coastline, the author states that the current sedimentation rates in the Bengal Delta may have been underestimated. He concludes that the current sedimentation at the coast is sufficient to

compensate for the sea-level rise at this time, but will not suffice in view of the accelerated sea-level rise. Bhattacharya emphasizes that unhindered sedimentation is essential in maintaining the equilibrium relative to sea-level rise. He also warns that the building of barrages, embankments and polders included in the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 prepared with input from Dutch experts runs counter to this. Finally, he calls for building a better sedimentation model for the entire Delta to manage water body governance in Bangladesh in a holistic manner.

The sixth paper, *Bangladesh Energy/Climate Nexus Part I- Quest for Energy Fix and a Trailblazing Rural/Household Sector*, by Ahmed Badruzzaman, notes energy use in Bangladesh and its history. The author surveys the country's difficulty in developing and providing access to modern energy sources. The author notes the dual nature of the country's energy scene, in terms of energy sources and utilization. While energy plans at the level of the state have been mixed and uncoordinated, there has been much recent progress in the often neglected rural/household energy sector. The key element in the progress is a multi-component energy system for clean cooking, advanced biogas use and CO₂-free solar-based off-grid/micro-grid home electrification outside the purview of the often unreliable national grid. This trailblazing growth engendered by domestic ingenuity is in congruence with multiple SDG's, the paper notes. The associated success in this sector can possibly inform the energy planners to consider options that are similarly suited to the country's terrain, societal aspirations, and economy, as they develop plans for the urban/ industrial/ commercial energy sector, instead of blindly considering options that arise out of the past of the developed world and are informed by choices crafted by external experts.

Prior to the twenty first century, economic growth was hailed as the overriding objective in developing countries such as Bangladesh. Environmental issues were considered to be redistributive—my enterprise gains at the expense of your pond's degradation. There was scant environmental regulation and an effective Department of Environment was not created until 1989. In fact, certain vested interests often proposed the choice of growth vs. environment. The arguments for this false choice became moot earlier this decade as countries subscribed to SDG's set up through the United Nations. The SDGs are an urgent call to shift the world onto a more sustainable path with the understanding that there is not necessarily a contradiction between environmental sustainability and economic growth. We hope the reader gets a sampling of the monumental challenge an endeavor to navigate this apparent contradiction poses, however, and the extraordinary efforts underway by Bangladeshi environmentalists, resident and non-resident, to navigate this challenge, through research, activism, and partnership.

The poet Khalil Gibran so lovingly noted, “Everything in nature bespeaks the mother.” As the papers in the present volume indicate, much harm has already come to the Mother, but all is not lost. Perhaps new research-driven information and insights, such as those in these papers, will allow us to “reexamine ethically what we have

inherited, what we are responsible for, and what we will pass on to coming generations,” as the Dalai Lama urges, in order to fashion an all-inclusive environmental movement to benefit us all.

Ahmed Badruzzaman (Paper 1–5)

Farida Khan (Paper 6)