

# The privilege of being a brown South Asian traveller



**NO STRINGS ATTACHED**

ONE of the interesting perks of being a brown South Asian, travelling anywhere in the world, is the special attention you get from various official quarters. Getting a visa anywhere in the northern hemisphere, for instance, is like winning a lottery and could even count as a status symbol. Prior to such a windfall, if it at all occurs, it will mean filling out pages of a form that can ultimately be published as a booklet of your family's ancestry and a mini biography of yourself. The unique complexities of being someone from the subcontinent makes the whole process a delightful conundrum—if, for example, your father was born during British rule and lived through the Partition, the independence of India and Pakistan, and then that of Bangladesh, how do you answer “Where is your father from?” Should it be British India, India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh, or all of the above?

Your special status becomes even more apparent when you actually travel and have to go through multiple security checks where you know you will receive extra scrutiny compared to people of any other nationality—well, besides being or even looking Middle Eastern, to certain eyes. Then

you get royal scrutiny of a totally different level.

On the plane you know you shouldn't linger too long outside the lavatories, especially not in front of the exit and definitely not with your partner—two brown people hanging around is much worse than one and can set of the alarm bells in many a paranoid passenger.

The conspicuous way in which a brown complexioned South Asian is treated makes you think you are the most important character among all the other passengers of uninteresting (as far as security personnel are concerned) ethnicities. In fact, sometimes you are so conscious of the extra attention that you may even start behaving strangely—like nervously tapping your leg, sporting an exaggerated air of nonchalance that actually makes you look like you're hiding something, or worse, smiling at the immigration officer in what you think is a friendly way that proves your innocence but ends up as a sinister grimace that can only spell impending trouble.

Personally, I don't know what I do to make security personnel be so drawn to me and it has been like this since long before 9/11, when the world didn't think that every Muslim in the planet was potentially a closet militant. For whatever reason, whenever I travelled to the West I would be singled out from the queue and be subject to interrogation.

Decades later, the legacy has endured

*Your special status becomes even more apparent when you actually travel and have to go through multiple security checks where you know you will receive extra scrutiny compared to people of any other nationality—well, besides being or even looking Middle Eastern, to certain eyes. Then you get royal scrutiny of a totally different level.*

and thanks to the horrific terror attacks in the name of religion and a successful global campaign of Islamophobia, I find myself getting undivided attention from overzealous security personnel. When travelling especially

to and from the US, it is with almost certainty that I will be picked out randomly among all the hundreds of passengers and then have the privilege of having a generous “pat down” (a euphemism for institutionalised groping) by a stern looking female security officer ominously wearing surgical gloves. The last time this happened was when I was just about to board the plane and the officer just stopped me at the gate and asked me if I would mind stepping aside.

Of course I mind, I wanted to say as my fellow passengers walked by with curious glances, but obviously didn't, even when in a monotone she explained all the objectionable things she was about to do to me.

One of the weird things I do when embarrassed or, in this case humiliated beyond belief, is to start smiling in a slightly deranged manner which hardly helps matters. So, while being felt up and down in the name of a security check and as another officer went through the entire contents of my humungous bag, all I could do was make embarrassed chortling sounds resembling a duck choking on its own saliva. I am not sure, though, whether I was more mortified by the invasive touching (I almost wanted to tell her to massage my aching lower back while she was at it) or by the fact that the other officer was now going to discover the sachets of instant coffee, creamer, and sugar I had snagged from the airport hotel room along with the balls of tissue carrying

discarded gum (I hate littering), chocolate wrappers, a crumpled bag with an extra pair of socks, crumbs from forgotten cookies, not to mention paper napkins with makeup stains, and a half eaten Snickers bar.

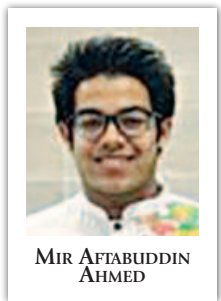
Security clearances at airports in present times have definitely managed to strip us of all vestiges of dignity and sense of privacy. Thus, woe betide if you are wearing loose pants that have been kept in place by a tight belt as you will most definitely be asked to take off the belt along with your shoes and jacket—oh your watch, earrings, keys etc. too—anything that may set the monitor off, which in my case could very well be the colour of my skin.

Only a few brave souls are unaffected by the bizarre stripping ritual at security checkpoints. Last year, a young man made news when he walked up to a security checkpoint at an airport in Detroit, removed all his clothes and accessories before approaching the metal detector. When he passed through in nothing but his birthday suit and with flying colours, the first thing he put back on was — his watch. Apparently, the police and the fire department responded but as he posed no threat the police did not arrest him. But then again, he was white and one wouldn't recommend such flamboyance in the case of a brown South Asian.

.....

Aasha Mehreen Amin is Deputy Editor, Op-Ed and Editorial section, The Daily Star.

# Disengaged voters in a declining democracy



AS Bangladesh celebrates the centennial birth anniversary of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman via the commemoration of 2020-2021 as the “Mujib Year”, it is important if not necessary for citizens to reflect on the symbolic achievements of Bangabandhu, in addition to partaking in celebratory events throughout the year. In hindsight, Sheikh Mujib was not simply a statesman, but equally importantly, he transitioned his political acumen towards navigating the Bengali people towards emancipation and freedom.

Perhaps, more than anything, his vision for our country remained ingrained in the idea of common people having a direct say in electing their public representatives. Nevertheless, as we celebrate the ideals of a leader whose reach goes beyond partisan lines, the recently concluded Dhaka mayoral elections indicate a severe eradication of public interest in the very idea of voting, and a simultaneous repudiation of the political elite in the form of a public message that people have little to no faith in the electoral system.

In recognising the influence of Sheikh Mujib in constructing the very roots of an independent nation, it is important to understand the narrative that neither he nor the Awami League became the symbolic manifestation of the independence movement by force or by luck. Throughout the 1960s, Bangabandhu pushed the West Pakistani leadership to heed the call of their own citizens; by 1970, he was able to inspire a clear majority of East Pakistanis to go to voting centres and thereby determine their own destinies. This is the very notion where our current political and civil leadership have completely and, in reality, intentionally failed.

Over the past decade, the Awami League has undoubtedly steered the nation towards successes on the economic front. For that, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina deserves our gratitude. Nevertheless, what is also certain is this—the public have lost interest in their right to vote. This stems from not simply the allegations of rigging, intimidation, and voter suppression which have become the political norm, but more importantly the

genuine belief by Awami League activists that their party cannot lose or in other cases, must not be allowed to lose electoral battles. To a large extent, the BNP under the leadership of its imprisoned Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia have faced severe institutional flaws too—failing to integrate the public in their activities and having a lacklustre grassroots system have resulted in the party becoming a docile political force. In summary, our political parties, with their aggressive actions and lack of democratic practices, have created a system wherein voter interest in politics and public life remains low. What the people are seeing with their own eyes, through a bold yet cautious media, is startlingly different from

what our government and public institutions are reporting. In essence, we are witnessing and participating in a camouflaged version of the political reality, where people are being disillusioned left, right, and centre. Hence, the citizens of the country continue losing their trust in a system which clearly has no respect for them.

On February 5, the Chief Election Commissioner told reporters that the voter turnout across the Dhaka elections was less than 30 percent, with Election Commissioner Mahbub Talukder stating it to be less than 25 percent. However, let there be no doubt that the people of Dhaka have expressed their concerns regarding the city—made clear by city dwellers in their

anger regarding the overuse of plastics in the election campaign, the need to make Dhaka a safer city for women and children, the immediate requirement to prioritise a cleaner Dhaka, and importantly, ensure a city which is more liveable.

For the 18 to 35 age group representing one-third of the Bangladeshi population, the need for accountability and answers is critical. In an age where technology and social media play a prominent role, that too within an increasingly nepotistic system, it may be possible for the powerful to dictate politics according to their needs, but in doing so, they concurrently make the young voters disengaged from a system which, in fairness, has rarely aimed at integrating youth

*In essence, we are witnessing and participating in a camouflaged version of the political reality, where people are being disillusioned left, right, and centre.*



PHOTO: STAR

perspectives. The Election Commission for one has failed in this regard miserably. The primary responsibility of this institution is to create the foundations for free, fair, and participatory electoral exercises—participatory not merely in relation to political parties, but in a sense that voters are encouraged to come to the polling stations. In the 2018 general elections and across the recently concluded mayoral elections, this very disengagement of voters from their “elected” leaders has resulted in the public losing its faith in the voting system.

I do not question the merits or the credentials of the newly elected Mayors for DNCC and DSCC—I sincerely hope they succeed in making the lives of Dhaka citizens better. They have the backing of a government which, in fairness, is at its strongest across its own political history. Yet, if the Awami League is to pay tribute to the ideals of Bangabandhu on his 100th birth anniversary, then what is certain is that it must take the leading role in engaging and enhancing the basic scope for democracy, and particularly participatory elections, to function and take place in Bangladesh. The right and ability to vote is a form of unparalleled power given to citizens by the Constitution, with the intention of ensuring that the public provide a mandate to its leadership. However, if current trends continue, then the future of this democracy, which is infected with gaping holes, will surely be the Achilles' heel in Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's vision of a thriving, developed, and sustainable Bangladesh.

.....

Mir Aftabuddin Ahmed is a regular contributor of The Daily Star, focusing on economics, politics and international relations. Email: aftab.ahmed@mail.utoronto.ca

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



7 February, 1964

**British Invasion launched with Beatles' arrival in U.S.**

The musical British Invasion began when the Beatles landed in New York City this day in 1964, and two nights later, as Beatlemania stormed America, their performance on The Ed Sullivan Show was watched by 73 million viewers.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Long stories

6 Suppress

11 Cast out

12 Brown shade

13 George of "Cheers"

14 Fencing swords

15 Bechamel and bearnaise

17 Bud

19 Groan inducer

20 Opening

23 Key of Chopin's "Winter Wind"

25 "—Las Vegas"

26 Bar order

28 Like custard

29 Light, in a way

30 Uno doubled

31 Track act

32 Powerful people

33 Fake

35 Singer Iglesias

38 took it easy

41 IRS worker

42 Ultrasound targets

43 Rustling sound

44 Out of fashion

DOWN

1 Emulate Ross

2 Hatchet's kin

3 Bar orders

4 Alan of "M\*A\*S\*H"

5 Attack

6 Hive leader

7 Game callers

8 Japanese prime minister

9 Notice

10 They're made of mins.

16 Becomes clotted

17 Called to the phone

18 Baja buddy

20 Bar orders

21 Bird-related

22 Accords

24 Opposing vote

25 Promise

27 Add

31 Thin soup

33 Start of a German count

34 "Toodleeo!"

35 Mouth part

36 "That's gross!"

37 Island gift

39 Hosp. parts

40 Spotted cube

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

H	O	F	F	A		L	O	L	A
A	R	I	A	S		N	A	V	A
R	I	N	K	S		O	N	E	N
L	O	N	E		S	C	A	R	C
E	L	I		R	A	H		T	E
M	E	S	S	A	G	E	S		
S	H	U	N		E	P	I	C	
				M	A	S	S	A	G
H	I	D		R	U	E		N	I
O	N	E	S	I			S	O	L
N	A	M	E	S		C	U	R	I
K	N	O	C	K		A	M	E	N
S	E	N	T			D	O	D	G

BEEBLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott