

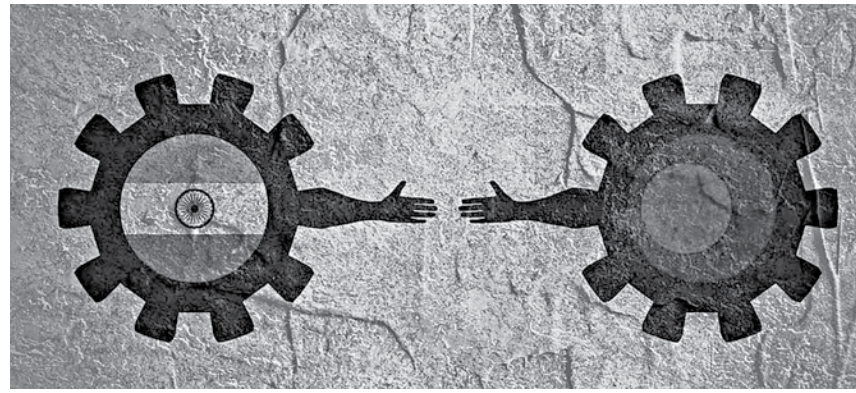
Oh, these misunderstanding Bangladeshis!

GORARDHAN DINGBAT

INDIAN Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla's visit to Bangladesh was a breath of fresh air. We should all be grateful to him for the explanations and elucidations he kindly provided to address various "misunderstandings" regarding India today.

It appears to be sad but true that no one really "understood" the tenderness, compassion and open-mindedness of the current Indian leadership. Those Indian Muslims (who are determined to misunderstand everything), those ungrateful few in Bangladesh (who have apparently forgotten 1971), those progressive forces in India (who are all self-loathing Indians anyway), those people of the world including the UN, human rights activists, civil libertarians (who are confused)—they ALL "misunderstood" India's sensitive and enlightened spirit reflected in the policies and initiatives pursued by this administration.

For example, the CAA and NRC are obviously meant only to help the persecuted and marginalised, not to discriminate and exclude. These Bangladeshi Muslims living in India are being encouraged to leave only so that they may participate in the economic development of Bangladesh. Furthermore, they do not send back any money through remittances to Bangladesh, while just a handful of Indians working in Bangladesh remit billions of dollars to India (the fourth or fifth largest source of its foreign remittances). Therefore, the current regime is encouraging these people to



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return only with the best interests of Bangladesh in mind.

There are other non-issues that clutter this relationship. For example, the Babri Masjid actions were necessary to right a historic wrong. It is part of India's efforts to liberate all these architectural sites supposedly constructed by the Muslim foreign invaders, which were actually either built by Hindus, or on Hindu sacred places to desecrate their religion. Do Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib, Ashutosh Varshney, Shashi Tharoor and all those so-called intellectuals know more about India's history than RSS Pracharakas? Those who want to visit these sites should go there promptly before the Taj Mahal becomes Rani Bhabani Mandir, although if President Trump decides to develop this property into a five-star hotel with a golf course, it may be called the Trump Mahal.

And Kashmir is the MOTHER

of all "misunderstandings". India HAS to protect Kashmiris from themselves, to save them from those evil fundamentalists of Pakistan. The government is even willing to change the country's constitution and its secular tradition which may perhaps cause a little inconvenience to a few Muslims, but it is being done to serve a higher cause. Didn't Lincoln suspend some rights during the Civil War in the US? Why don't these self-righteous human rights activists complain about THAT?

There are some other "issues" that are brought up which should be clarified with reference to context. For example, river water is not being shared but only to protect Bangladesh from floods; there are trade imbalances but only to make Bangladesh more competitive; there are border killings but only to save Bangladesh from terrorists and smugglers (as Mr Shringla

pointed out, there are more Indians than Bangladeshis who are killed by their security forces); coal-fired plants which would not be allowed to be built in India are being constructed by Indians in Bangladesh but only to ensure that India's environmental laws do not jeopardise the economic growth of Bangladesh; India's response to the Rohingya crisis is tepid, but only because of its conviction that Muslims should go to Muslim countries where they can be more comfortable, and also to demonstrate India's confidence that Bangladesh can handle all this without depending on the "big brother".

It is sometimes suggested that India may betray a slightly superior tone when dealing with Bangladesh. What India would like to point out is that respect has to be EARNED. India's condescension is not an insult, it is an incentive to Bangladesh, and a message that it must develop greater maturity and self-confidence in order to be taken seriously. It is also worth mentioning that India does not treat Bangladesh like Bhutan or Sikkim, but doesn't. There is insufficient appreciation in Bangladesh of this graciousness.

It is abundantly clear that everything that India does is meant to help Bangladesh. The constant carping and criticism in Bangladesh are merely the selfish rants of some who have never heard of "tough love", nor have they read Shakespeare, when in Act 3, Scene 4, Hamlet says, "I must be cruel only to be kind" (though the setting is a bit awkward because he had just mistakenly killed his uncle Polonius).

As President Trump pointed out when neo-Nazi white supremacists

rampaged through Charlottesville in 2017, that there were "very fine people on both sides". Bangladeshis have not properly understood that there may be some "very fine people" who may preach hatred and violence against Muslims in India. Incidentally, it should be pointed out that Mr Trump, with his great soul and subtle wit, "understands" Prime Minister Modi and therefore embraced him physically, as well as politically and spiritually.

Everyone must realise that this is a new India, a "rising" India, climbing out of the Gandhian/Nehruvian/Congress shadows which perverted its democracy through blatant coddling of minorities, particularly the Muslims. Today, if a Muslim even looks at a cow with longing eyes, appropriate action will be taken. This is only fair. Yes, they have been called "termites", but Hindus believe in the sacredness of ALL life, and hence no disrespect should be taken.

Of course, Mr Shringla did not necessarily say all of these things, but it is this narrative that formed the backdrop to his justifiable frustrations during his commanding (at times, perhaps a bit TOO commanding) performance at the public discussion that had been arranged.

The Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz is supposed to have said that living next to a big and powerful neighbour is a blessing, but may also turn into a curse. Bangladeshis have always assumed the first, and fervently hopes that it never becomes the second.

Dingbat is from Erewhon, Samuel Butler's imagined country which, if spelled backward, becomes Nowhere. S/he may be reached at dingbat@satire.com (though net services are not very reliable).

When will America be ready?



SHIFTING IMAGES

MILIA ALI

AS my daughter and I drove to the polling booth last week to vote at the Democratic Primaries in the United States, I asked: "So, who are you voting for?" "Who

do you think? The smartest and most capable candidate, and the only woman left in the race—Elizabeth Warren," came her prompt response. I was taken aback. Just as it was unusual to remain undecided about one's choice this late, it was also unusual to be so confident. This is simply because the 2020 US election is like no other that many of us have encountered in our lifetime. And Democrats must choose the right candidate to contest Trump.

Without belabouring the point, let me just say that the American institutions are in shambles, the rule of law has become skewed toward the rich and the powerful, and the bar for corruption and nepotism has reached an all-time low. Pundits say that history will be harsh on this presidency—but as we approached the polling location, I wondered: do I have time to wait for history to pronounce its judgment? I decided to vote with my head and not my heart and chose the most "viable" candidate who can hopefully beat Donald Trump in the election. Joe Biden.

However, my daughter's choice made me pause for a moment. How could I not vote for Warren? As a woman from a country where I grew up fighting for women's rights and freedom at every step, my decision sounded like a betrayal to women's causes. This is what the Trump presidency has done to so many of us women. We have been cowed down—we still have the

fight left in us, but all the resistance has been congealed into a single objective. We cannot have four more years of a president who demeans women each day. In some ways, he has succeeded in lowering our standards to the extent that we are no longer glued to our ideologies. We are fixated on a single objective: winning the presidency in 2020.

Hence, I put a damper on my emotions, held back my tears and voted for the male candidate who I thought was most likely to beat Donald Trump. The truth is, I am still reeling from the blow that Hillary Clinton's loss has dealt the country. We all supported a woman—she was smart, educated and ostensibly electable. She won the popular votes but the electoral system betrayed her. There is no doubt in my mind that gender was part of the reason she lost the presidency.

Emotions aside, the deeper issue is: why is America not yet ready for a woman president? The rest of the world has moved ahead in this regard. Even my native country, Bangladesh, has had women prime ministers for almost two decades. Ironically, Asian males (in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh), accused by the United States of denying women their rights, have been comfortable voting for a female head of state! In contrast, Warren was haunted by the invisible spectre of American sexism, which is the worst kind of sexism because it is so subtle that some people don't believe it exists at all. No one dared say she is not suited to be the president because of her gender, but there were covert references to whether she was too aggressive and preachy or if the troops would look up to her as their Commander in Chief.

Interestingly, a journalist even asked her about her glowing complexion even at 70, and she unabashedly answered that she used Pond's moisturizer. A simple, old-fashioned beauty tip, offered so willingly by the woman who



Sen Elizabeth Warren, who dropped out of the 2020 Democratic presidential race, represents a missed opportunity for America to elect a woman president.

PHOTO: REUTERS/BRIAN SNYDER

had a plan for everything, including health care, equal wages, planned parenthood, paid maternity leave and education for our kids. Pundits who think candidates should be grilled only on their policies may sneer at this exchange. But identity politics exists in the US. Young women like my daughter are perturbed by the uneven treatment meted to women seeking high office. They saw Elizabeth Warren as one of them since she walked a risky tightrope between being a woman and defying male chauvinism. And she made it look easy.

When Warren's critics couldn't fault her policy plan, her personal life was scrutinised as no other candidate. She was never forgiven for her claims of Native American ancestry and her decision to take a DNA test—which revealed a minute indigenous

heritage and which ignored issues of cultural history that many Native Americans believe defines them. The nickname that Trump mockingly gave her, Pocahontas, stuck until the end. Meanwhile, the president himself flooded the nation with well-orchestrated lies about his tax returns, his sex scandals and, more recently, about the spread of coronavirus in the country. Sometimes I wish that the Warren-doubting pundits would come out of the closet and talk plainly about why they don't want a woman president. At least that would make the debate more real. And people like me could stop wondering if sexism exists only in our heads.

Despite her exit, Warren's campaign taught us many facts about being a woman. We struggled with whether or not it was okay for Joe Biden to

massage women's shoulders uninvited, or should we forgive Mike Bloomberg for telling a pregnant woman to "kill" her unborn child so that she wouldn't have to take maternity leave. We tolerated Sanders supporters sending Warren snake emojis and bullying her female campaign employees. We ignored all these provocations and even frontal attacks because we rationalised that they matter little when fighting a president who is accused of sexual assault and who publicly belittles women at every opportunity. We fell into the trap of the endless debates about being "electable", and rightly or wrongly, decided it was not worth taking the risk this time. I rationalised: "I'm ready for a female president, but the country isn't." As if I was not part of the country!

Elizabeth Warren's good-bye speech was full of compassion and hope: "We have shown that a woman can stand up, hold her ground, and stay true to herself... the fight may take a new form, but I will be in that fight, and I want you in this fight with me. We will persist!" As I listened, I blamed myself for not having the courage to fight her battle with her—a woman of integrity who spent a career trying to do the right thing and now did the right thing again: unite the party to help overturn the Trump administration.

The day Warren dropped out, the media gushed forth with praise for her—the well-deserved praise they never gave her when she was running for president. It made me wonder: Do people admire powerful women only when they are not seeking power? I don't know the answer. What I know is that I did not give the most able candidate my vote because I doubted that a woman could defeat Trump. It's a cross that I will bear for a long time!

Milia Ali is a Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

QUOTABLE Quote

ALDOUS HUXLEY
(1894-1963)
English novelist and critic gifted with an acute and far-ranging intelligence whose works are notable for their wit and pessimistic satire.

Experience is not what happens to you; it's what you do with what happens to you.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	34 Wallop	9 Spotted
1 Critical asset	36 Llama's land	10 Goes astray
6 Rental contract	38 Try to hit	16 Slangy agreement
11 Shoe part	40 Squat	18 Helps out
12 European viper	43 Reached	19 Took wing
13 Life	44 "Tomorrow" singer	21 Audition goal
14 Reef explorer	45 Hot crime	23 Winter glider
15 Prone to pry	46 Exodus figure	24 Steak choice
17 Feature of some 1950s cars		25 Gush forth
18 Miles off	DOWN	27 Tokyo thank-you
20 Sweeping story	Rickety boat	30 Pharaoh's symbol
22 Poorly	2 Clumsy person	33 Singer Mars
23 Typewriter bars	3 Backbones	34 Poet Teasdale
26 Car sticker	4 Choir member	35 Deceitful sort
28 Sports summary	5 Work units	37 Dutch cheese
29 Cursed	6 Young fellow	39 Cargo unit
31 Mine matter	7 Building	41 Cobbler's cousin
32 Tops	8 Pieces from Abby and Ann	42 "You betcha!"
33 Was windy		

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

E	C	H	O	T	A	T	E	R	S
M	O	O	N	A	M	E	L	I	A
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A	D	O	R	E	S	T	O	G	A
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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott