

A case for declaring Probashi Dibash in Mujib Year

NAIJUL KHASRU

IN 1970, there were approximately 40,000 Bangladeshi expatriates living in Britain. There was no significant Bangladeshi diaspora in any other part of the world. Yet this small number of people played a vital role in our war of independence in 1971. While many Bangladeshis crossed borders to take up arms, the expatriates were instrumental in creating international awareness of the barbarous crimes and atrocities committed by Pakistani occupying forces and raising much-needed financial resources for the freedom fighters.

Many expatriates simply handed in their unopened pay packets to the Bangladesh fund week after week (I learned of this from Justice Imman Ali, who, as a teenager at the time, was participating in collecting funds). They remain the unsung heroes of Bangladesh. Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, in his book *Probashi Muktijuddher Dinguli*, said that soon after independence, on behalf of the expatriates, a sum of 378,871 pounds was sent to the finance ministry which formed the first foreign currency of the government of Bangladesh.

Fast forward to 2020, it is estimated that there are 12 million Bangladeshi expatriates living and working in 140 countries. The ever-increasing remittances sent by the expatriates have been vital in elevating Bangladesh's position to one of the fastest growing economies in the world today. The yearly remittances have passed the USD 20 billion mark. If in 1972 Bangladesh's foreign currency reserve stood at 378,000 pounds, thanks to the expatriates, then that figure now stands at a staggering USD 45 billion, again largely due to the efforts of expatriate men and women.

So dedicating a day to the expatriates by declaring it as the Probashi Dibash (Expatriate Day) would not only be a huge morale booster for the Bangladeshi diaspora worldwide, thereby increasing the remittance inflow, but it would also open an avenue for Bangladesh to tap into its enormous human resources abroad that have hitherto been unexplored. Such resources are likely to be just as significant in value as the remittances.

Many countries have recognised the benefit

of devising a way of having a consistently close link with their expatriates not only to enhance remittances, but also to take advantage of their expertise gained through education, training and work in advanced economies. Taiwan has been well-known for inviting academics of Taiwanese heritage from top American universities to spend regular sojourns in Taiwan sharing their knowledge and experiences with local universities, with tremendous success. Vietnam, the Philippines and Turkey have similar programmes. Economists world over agree that the Chinese emergence as an economic giant was possible because of its success in attracting billions of dollars of investment from Chinese-Americans in 1980s.

The case of India requires a special mention. In 2001, the Indian government set up a high-level committee on Indian diaspora with a view to increasing connectivity for mutual benefit. In accordance with the recommendation of the committee, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the then prime minister, announced January 9 as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Indian Expatriate Day). The date was chosen to mark its most famous son and expatriate Mahatma Gandhi's return from South Africa to India in 1915.

Since 2003, the day has been marked with a three-day event inaugurated by the prime minister of the day or the head of state of a country with a large Indian diaspora, usually attended by around 2,000 Indian expatriate delegates. The event provides a cordial and apolitical environment where expatriates exchange ideas with Indian policymakers, business community and others regarding how their skills and expertise could be utilised to benefit India. There is also clear evidence that these events have contributed to an increase in remittance flow to the country. The highlight of the event is the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award given to the expatriates for outstanding achievements in various fields.

It is regrettable that Bangladesh is yet to recognise its worldwide diaspora as anything beyond row remittance earners. Undoubtedly, the declaration of a Probashi Dibash would be a significant step in the right direction.

Let us look at the Bangladeshi diaspora

in the UK. It makes for an amazing story. Thousands of miles away from their roots, Bangladeshis sit in British parliament. They sit in judgement in British courts, work as important government scientists and diplomats. There are thousands of them teaching a wide range of subjects in British schools, technical institutes and universities. They work as doctors and surgeons in hundreds of British hospitals. Similar successes

with the country's policymakers and business community would significantly alter that situation.

In many countries, Bangladeshi diaspora consists of second, third and fourth generations. Many are destined to be leaders in diverse fields in the countries where they are born and raised. The potential benefit for Bangladesh in entrenching in them their Bangladeshi heritage would be boundless.



File photo of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at a press conference in London on January 8, 1972.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

are emulated in the USA, Canada and other countries by Bangladeshis. Establishing a close connection with them would benefit Bangladesh enormously.

Unlike China and India, Bangladesh has not succeeded in enticing its expatriates into large-scale investment in the country. Piecemeal attempts over the years have failed due to lacklustre efforts and negative experiences of many investors. A forum that allows expatriate investors to have a dialogue

If the argument for a Probashi Dibash seems overwhelming, then there is also a particular date for the commemoration of such a day, relating to which the argument is just as compelling. This leads me to a story of a love affair without equal!

On January 8, 1972, as the dawn broke, a plane landed in London. A dignified looking man disembarked. This man was none other than Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the newly independent

Bangladesh.

It is no coincidence that after being freed from Pakistani prison, Bangabandhu had no hesitation in choosing London as his first destination before returning home. According to Zafar Chowdhury, who piloted the plane, upon arriving at Heathrow, Bangabandhu's first request was to contact a number of his "friends", who were restaurant owners. When a British Foreign Office representative informed him that an arrangement had been made for his accommodation at the Claridge's hotel, he thanked the official but suggested staying at a modest hotel in Russell Square "where it would be easier for our people to see me". The official politely informed Bangabandhu that a head of state's security can only be provided at Claridge's but assured him that arrangements would be made for people to meet him there subject to security measures. Dr Kamal Hossain, who was also released from Pakistani jail with Bangabandhu, revealed that he was fully aware that "London had been an active centre from which support for the liberation war had been pursued."

That the father of the nation was a visionary leader is an unequivocal truth. He understood the sacrifices that the expatriates had made, and foresaw that one day they would play a pivotal role in shaping the country into Shonar Bangla. He granted dual citizenship status to expatriates at a time when only a handful of countries allowed such a status to their expatriates. The expatriates also reciprocated Bangabandhu's love for them by hiring a British lawyer to defend him when Ayub Khan tried to eliminate him by instituting the infamous Agartala conspiracy case, by taking to heart his March 7 speech, and playing a heroic role in freeing the country and continuing in that vein as remittance fighters.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the Mujib Year celebrations, the spirit of the occasion remains ablaze. It would be remiss of the government if it fails to see the dynamism in declaring January 8 as the Probashi Dibash in Mujib Year. Bangabandhu would have loved nothing more than this.

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Why did I nurture my toxic relationship for so long?

ARC

I started dating him at the young and impressionable age of 19. He was a year older than me. I had just started school/university, a new and scary world, and immediately found someone that I thought would provide some shield, something to hide behind. I was incredibly anxious about facing large, unknown crowds. But with him acting as a blanket of security, I did not have to worry so much about social anxieties. At least I had one person with me to face the brutal world.

It would have been impossible to predict then that it was the beginning of a years-long affair of tumultuous highs and lows, of deep dives into a mental health crisis, of trying to figure out my partner, and slowly discovering the facades of modern-day excuses by men to remain unaccountable.

I say this now, with retrospect to my advantage, but while it was happening to me, I could not have guessed for a moment the mental abuse I was being subjected to.

It started innocently enough. Within the first few weeks of being with each other, the mixed messages started. "We don't have to label this, do we?" he would ask. I immediately agreed to the offer because, what did I have to lose? Young and free, I was fine with the idea of a romantic relationship that was not particularly exclusive (not that I was seeing other men). No sooner had I gotten comfortable with that idea than he proposed we make our partnership exclusive. I agreed to that too. From the get-go, I was subjected to a barrage of mixed signals. There were the days when he could not stay a moment away from me and painted rosy pictures of a future together. But he would not let me get comfortable with any scenario. Only he could dream for the both of us. As soon as I participated in our shared dream,

he would change it up. "No, I don't want to get married. Marriage ruins everything. We should just stay this way because I don't want to hate you ever," he would say on some days.

I would readily agree, mostly because I didn't have the energy to fight him, and he had me convinced that he loved me so much that he couldn't let marriage ruin it.

I very callously avoided seeing the signals of subtle domination. He would state intent first, then subtly nudge me into agreement. I had no tools in my repertoire to recognise the slow grooming. He was mellow, introverted and apparently a total momma's boy.

To me, these were harmless traits, indicators of a "good boy". I wanted to be with a "good boy" who would protect me. For I had grown up in a home where my parents shared an extremely toxic relationship and there was often physical violence—my marker for abuse. When my significant other started his slow mental abuse, I refused to see or acknowledge that as a form of trauma. The bar for abuse had been set very high—physical battering.

And after all, my partner's poor behaviour was just "boys being boys".

He would also hide basic day-to-day details about his life from me, providing me no reason for those actions. The basic level at which he would withhold information was laying the groundwork for hiding bigger details of his life. The relationship was not devoid of intimacy though (or what I thought was intimacy). In the first stages of dating, he was always very agreeable and kind with periodic mood swings (periods where he detached from me and would be extremely dismissive and rude). He would return from these swings extremely kind and apologetic, asking me to forgive him for his mistakes. He never really clarified what those mistakes were.

There was also jealousy. The unhealthy

Men, it seems, have a new tool at their disposal. From being the bad guy up front, men like my ex-partner have come across a golden formula. They play the soft-boy gimmick.

kind, I can now see. When we both joined the same field of work, mainly dominated by men, he was at first proud of me, but soon enough resentful of any recognition I got. So resentful that it made me switch. I was constantly subjected to personal taunts from him where he would say things like "Of course, you will be successful working in this field. There are no other girls here and you are trying to score in an empty field."

It was slow, his effect on me. In due time, from working on the field, I decided to become more desk-based, because I was convinced (by him) that trying to score in an empty field is shameful.

He was also subtly critical of my style, often resorting to terms like "khet", "too bling", etc. to describe me. He made fun of my weight, but at least he didn't beat me up. Until years later, I realised he had beaten me up all along. It was mental torture that showed up in physical symptoms—psychosomatic pain.

In his presence, I ended up distancing myself from old friends. I was too busy walking on eggshells, too tired from planning out each and every conversation so that he didn't get too upset with me. Upset enough for me to receive the dreaded silent treatment.

It took nearly a decade of such poor behaviour, zero accountability, terrible communication, and a string of affairs on his side for me to finally walk out.

To cover up his many affairs, he would be extra nice to me. So nice that I worried if I spoke out loud of my suspicion that he was cheating on me, he would leave.

Why did I not want a cheater to leave? Why did I stay with someone who was not even willing to do the bare minimum? Who was lauded by society and parents for doing the bare minimum?

In retrospect, it's hard to tell why we stay in toxic relationships. But be part of one and you will find all sorts of excuses to stay in the partnership (a partnership that you will find over time heavily imbalanced when it comes to power structures).

Men, it seems, have a new tool at their disposal. From being the bad guy up front, men like my ex-partner have come across a golden formula.

They play the soft-boy gimmick, they don't physically batter you, but they mentally control you. You get groomed over time to do, behave, say as they please. Because, upsetting them is not an option, after all they are "soft boys" who get very upset if you don't do what they want.

My former partner showed me many ways in which women are controlled in the 21st century.

Some men have moved on from physical battering to mental battering. Us women, meanwhile, have only very recently started to learn, gain power over years of subjugation by men. The world still makes excuses for men. They still want us to adjust and accommodate men and their poor behaviour. Because my former partner did not scream or shout and show anger in the traditional way, I was unable to recognise or even call out the toxic behaviour.

I am no expert on toxic relationships but here's my two takas' worth on the matter and what I think stopped me.

When I realised just how ill I had gotten through the years of my relationship, the messages/pleas of my friends and family finally fell on my ears. I spoke to friends, strong female friends, who finally told me that I COULD leave this man, even though we had been together for years and our families knew. They told me I should try and forget the social stigma of a failed relationship, which often puts the blame on a woman. I learned to recognise toxic patterns, of the years-long manipulation that had held me tight in the grip of that man. I also started therapy where I learned that I had the power to walk away but I would need a strong support system for that. There are many women—who I know or whose stories I have heard—that could not walk away from such poor relationships because their families did not support them. Because their wedding venue was fixed. Because this was the one man they had been with. Or because, they thought they could SALVAGE or FIX a dying relationship.

We are not taught from the get-go that we can demand better, that we deserve better, and that we should learn to say no and be cool with it when a boy throws a hissy fit because he didn't get what he wanted. We let our boys go and even laud them for doing the bare minimum.

While a woman is expected to just do things, men are shown appreciation for doing the same things. For example, being nice and taking care of each other.

In the end, I think it's a matter of asking better for ourselves but it's also about men being more accountable. They need to do better. And we need to walk away more.

The writer is a journalist who chose not to disclose her identity because of the personal nature of the article.

QUOTABLE Quote

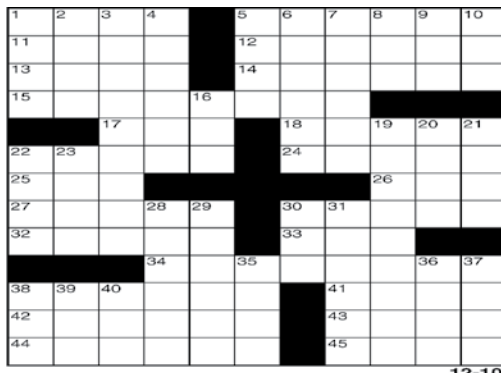


NOAM CHOMSKY
(Born in 1928)
American linguist and philosopher

In this possibly terminal phase of human existence, democracy and freedom are more than just ideals to be valued - they may be essential to survival.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

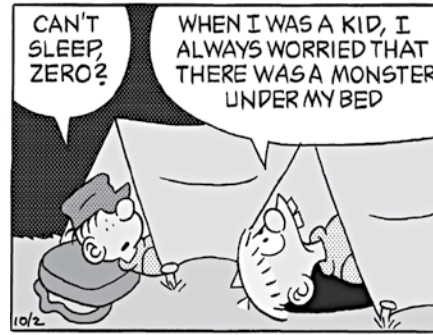
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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