

# Time to forge a new beginning

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PRIME Minister Manmohan Singh's much awaited visit to Bangladesh has raised hope in the two countries on the resolution of several bilateral disputes that have bedeviled their relations. The visit coming after 12 years is also the first visit of the Indian prime minister to a neighbouring country. Thus the symbolism and substance of this visit cannot be underestimated. Dhaka's proactive step to handover Indian insurgents and its decision to go ahead with regional connectivity forced even hardcore sceptics in India to recognise the new reality.

A close look at the Joint Communiqué of February 2010 issued during Sheikh Hasina's visit to India shows that out of 50 points only 23 are directly related to bilateral cooperation. These are cooperation on security issues, demarcating boundary and exchange of enclaves, establishing Ashuganj and Silghat as ports of call, providing twenty-four hour access in Tinbigha corridor, grant of transit to Nepal and Bhutan through India to use Mongla and Chittagong sea ports, allowing India to use port facilities, establishing rail link and converting broad gauge to meter gauge.

Similarly initiative to transmit 250 MW power from India is in progress. India has already signed an agreement on the \$1 billion credit line which would be spent on developing rail, road and ports. The Joint Boundary Group has achieved significant success and the two countries are likely to

finalise a settlement on the border that includes exchange of enclaves and land under adverse possession. Border haat has already been inaugurated. The two countries are likely to ink an agreement on Teesta. It is expected that India would announce major trade concessions including duty free access.

The relationship with India would to a large extent be shaped by the relations between the government and opposition. The nature and direction of relationship has been moulded by the two parties in Bangladesh from their respective ideological prisms. While Awami League follows a policy of engaging India, BNP justifies its approach towards India as its attempt to portray its position as "saving sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Bangladesh. As an ideological opposite of AL, the party has nurtured a domestic constituency that sustains on a discourse of anti-Indianism.

Given the dichotomous attitude of the two parties doubts are often expressed in India regarding sustainability of the current bonhomie. While many leaders in the BNP often accuse India of being regime-centric, their stance has not helped the matter. It has rather adopted security-centric

approach raising the traditional fear of India which relies on colonial narrative of relationship between communities and plays on the fear psychosis of the people on issues of sovereignty, heightening apprehension and converting them into political capital. For BNP, good relations with India hold little political prospect.

While the political and economic relations between the two countries are important, general atmospheric of the relationship would boost their ties further. Felicitating Indian soldiers for their contribution to Bangladesh's liberation war or conferring award on Indira Gandhi for her role will place India's historic role in right perspective.

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Unfortunately, in the national discourse India's role in 1971 has either been underplayed or portrayed in a negative light by vested quarters for ideological reasons. Recognising historical reality will have salutary effect on bilateral relations.

Liberalisation of visa, increasing scholarship to Bangladeshi students will further the ties. A work permit system to allow the people of the two countries to work in each other's countries needs to be considered as a long term solution to the issue of

illegal migration.

While introduction of non-lethal weapons and exercise of utmost restraint by the Border Security Force of India would help, however, to address the problem in long term would require comprehensive border management which would necessitate joint management and sharing of responsibility as the porous border is often misused by anti-national elements like smugglers, criminals, arms traders and traffickers.

The potential of the relationship lies in the prospect of connecting with the people of the two countries to prevent its manipulation by successive governments guided by their narrow regime interest. In this context the prime minister's itinerary must include a meeting with the leader of opposition Begum Khaleda Zia to take her perspectives into account.

Manmohan Singh's decision to include chief ministers of the five states that share borders with Bangladesh in his entourage demonstrates that New Delhi is prepared to go beyond a security-centric approach to involve the stakeholders in the provinces, to whom Bangladesh is not just another country but a geographical reality with which their economic future is intertwined.

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# Race and the English riots

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THE "liberating" Spring Winds across Arabia brought with it dissent, death and destruction but also carries great hope for freedom, democracy and human rights in a region dominated by dictatorial families and military despots with dubious claims to power and totally unused to any expression of strong popular will.

These have mutated into "anarchic" gale force Summer Winds ravaging England with its mature and self assured democracy, grand institutions and haughty judiciary. The Arab regimes were caught off guard by the spontaneous uprising of new media savvy youth across the region but what happened to the ultra efficient British government and in particular the famed London Metropolitan Police? On full holiday mode, both the government and the police were found to be napping on duty as first London burnt and within hours the flames spread across the country.

Now, in the immediate aftermath of the worst and most senseless rioting in contemporary British history, politicians and pundits are out in force wringing their hands and tearing their hair in an effort to make sense of it all. The figures emerging are grim; three dead, over 800 arrests in London alone (where 16,000 police officers have been deployed), hundreds of millions in damage costs, town centers across England affected, six regional police authorities including the London Met requiring additional manpower to contain the situation.

The real cost however is incalculable. A gaping wound has been rediscovered in British society that raises profound questions about the competence and capacity of the government and its law enforcing agencies as well as about the nature of British society itself and the values that underpin it. The world's greatest exporter of "civilisation" appears to have run out of that precious commodity herself!

Who are these rioters that have so undermined the British self image in full glare of the world community?

The accepted wisdom is that they are predominantly male, young and black, though there is plenty of evidence already emerging from the courts of older and paler skinned men and at least some girls and women. The fact is that much of the looting in particular seems to have been opportunistic and perpetrated not by organised criminals but by first time offenders. This will become clearer as the many hundreds already arrested are put through the courts in the coming days. The process of tracing mobile messages and CCTV footage will take months and potentially thousands may eventually find themselves behind bars. Judges are already meting out punishments that are disproportionate to the crime, presumably to assuage the anger of the police and the state at their acute embarrassment and no doubt to make an example of the offenders.

Tabloid editorials focused on explaining the term "sick society" as used recently by a sanctimonious Cameron by stating the biggest cliché of them all: "The sickness starts on welfare addicted estates where feckless parents let children run wild." As always, the poor in housing estates are being demonised wholesale where only a few among their ranks are responsible for terrorising their own communities as much as for the looting and rioting.

If this is the level of wisdom governing governmental policy responses to this complex phenomenon then we should be worried. David Cameron's hard line approach is akin to locking the door real tight after the horse has bolted.

The fact that he is using the lowest common denominator to make sweeping judgments about everyone caught up in the riots is crude and counterproductive.

However, given the nature of organised crime in London, it is clear that criminal elements were out in force over the last days, not simply to make a quick buck but also to teach the police a lesson. Inner city youth have a hatred for the police based on their experience of police violence and discriminatory conduct (as evidenced in stop and search statistics compiled by the police themselves) as well as the growing numbers of deaths in custody, of black men in particular.

The perception and reality of inner city policing is what kick-started this spontaneous catastrophe and yet this hardly figures in the current discourse among the chattering classes. The "social selfishness" of the insulated "haves" in English society is evident in their regular denigration of the poor, of those on benefits, the unemployed and "hooded" youth in particular. The lack of respect shown to most young people by the police particularly in inner cities is staggering and appears to be policy driven, in spite of the cumulative damage caused.

The circumstances in which police shot and killed Mark Duggan, a 29 year old father of four, who was

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stopped in a mini-cab and shot point blank, remain shrouded in mystery. He was a black man in a black neighbourhood carrying a gun....was that sufficient to shoot him dead? The Independent Police Complaints Commission has already had a ballistics report and declared that Mark's weapon was not fired.

Our RAB engages in the rhetoric of "cross fire" to justify deaths in their hands, it seems even that avenue is no longer open to the London Metropolitan Police.

The burdens on a modern police force in a large, multi-racial city are enormous, and a brief history of race and policing is required to understand the context of the current riots:

After the Scarman Report published in 1981 exposed police racism and the infamous SUS law which used brutal stop and search methods against black communities, there was a feeling that the government had learnt some lessons after the Brixton and Toxteth riots which were essentially a response to sustained police harassment and racism. Notwithstanding the hullabaloo at the time not much changed.

The inability of politicians to be critical of the police to this day is a deep weakness which has allowed them to literally get away with murder and gives very little hope to Asian and black youth seeking redress in the face of unjust policing. The evident

weaknesses in making the police accountable for their actions increase the likelihood of street action against police wrongdoings. Every urban riot since the '60s was caused or exacerbated in large part by repressive and racist policing.

The police have been under much greater scrutiny after the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993. His murderers were never brought to justice because of police incompetence on a monumental scale, seen by many as police collusion with violent racists. The public enquiry headed by Lord Macpherson in 1999 produced a defining report exposing police incompetence and a deep level of racism which was endemic in the force. In his conclusive pronouncements he declared the Met Police to be "institutionally racist" and suggested that all major public organisations had a real problem with deep rooted racism in respect of their service delivery and employment functions which needed urgent addressing.

The strength of public opinion coupled with the credibility of Lord McPherson ensured that the British state and the Met had to accept the conclusions of this seminal report.

However, the fight back against this report and its radical conclusions began almost immediately as the

police and the state was found reeling at its implications. For those of us who were involved in the national anti-racist movement at the time and had flagged up for years the deep rooted and insidious nature of racism as a pervasive, institutional phenomenon that systematically disempowered and discriminated against people of colour, the Macpherson report was a welcome validation.

Calls for a root and branch reform of policing came from numerous quarters. As the chairman of the National Assembly against Racism I, along with others, took this campaign nationwide and involved the powerful trade union movement in the cause. There was a glow of satisfaction on our faces....for a while. But within months things began to change (or rather not change).

A BBC report at the time stated: "Publication of the Macpherson report in February 1999 is regarded by many as a defining moment in British race relations. Allegations of incompetence and racism against Metropolitan police officers in charge of the case soured race relations as did two internal police inquiries which exonerated the Met itself. The Macpherson report delivered a damning assessment of the 'institutional racism' of the Met police and policing in general."

It made 70 recommendations, many aimed specifically at improving police attitudes to racism and

stressed the importance of a rapid increase in the numbers of black and Asian police officers. These included a radical overhaul of stop and search methods, rigorous race awareness training throughout the police force, expanding the scope of race equality legislation to include the entire public sector, etc. Concrete action had already been taken on one of the report's key proposals -- strengthening the 1976 Race Relations Act. This obliged major central and local government bodies, the police and educational establishments to ensure their workforce reflected their communities. Not a single public organisation has been able to actualise this grand aspiration and employment levels for black and minority ethnic communities are consistently significantly poorer.

In response to heavy criticism in Sir William Macpherson's report, an independent police authority was set up in July 2000 to oversee the Metropolitan police, which had been the only force in England and Wales not to be monitored by such a body. The Met also set up an independent advisory group to advise it on race issues. But within months four black members of the group resigned, saying they had been reduced to being "nodding dogs." In their resignation letter the four said that the group was controlled by the police and had lost its independence and credibility.

The Macpherson report was initially supported by the major political parties but became an issue of contention as early as 2001. The then Conservative leader, William Hague, was accused of "playing the race card" following a speech he made to the Centre for Policy Studies in which he talked about a "post-Macpherson crisis" in the Metropolitan police. Mr. Hague linked a rise in violent street crime to a drop in stop and searches of black people because police officers feared being called racist.

The process of undermining the Macpherson report continued apace, all that really survives is the anti-racist jargon and a highly developed bureaucratic structure long on form and short on substance.

Hague's words were contradictory to the reality on the ground and many black and Asian people -- including Stephen Lawrence's father, Neville, who filed a complaint after being stopped -- said they were still being unfairly targeted. Even now, after years of race awareness training and an apparent overhaul of the culture of the Met, Mark Duggan died in a stop and search operation.

People have the right to ask WHY? Why is it that black people are still disproportionately targeted by the police? Why do so many end up dead in their hands?

Raising these questions is not to give solace to the rioters who have disgraced themselves and their nation before the world but to plead for a policy response that is honest about the state of inequality and poverty in Britain and the deep alienation of a generation of youth who simply cannot be reformed by punitive police action alone.

Desperate for answers, friends and family of Mark organised and marched peacefully through Tottenham on the fateful day. Mark's family and friends were demonstrating peacefully in front of the police station. In spite of repeated requests, no senior officer could be found to talk to the family and offer some information. Word of this spread like wildfire across the community and as dusk approached angry crowds began to fill the streets of Tottenham. The rest is history in the making.

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