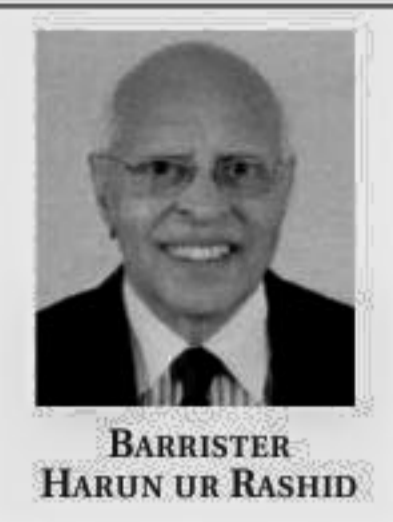


**BOTTOM LINE**

# French president's visit to New Delhi: Strategic significance



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

**F**RENCH President François Hollande was welcomed to Delhi by his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee with great pomp on February 14 when he arrived for a two-day visit. A 21-gun salute heralded his arrival at the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

In a rare speech in English, Hollande said: "It's a great honour for me to be visiting India. I thank you Mr. President for this welcome. I am sure that this visit will lay our relationship at the best level we can hope. And we must always improve the relationship between our two countries. India is a great democracy."

The large delegation of five ministers and about 60 businessmen who accompanied the French president demonstrated the importance and the purpose of the visit.

The preparation for the visit began in June last year when President Hollande met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of the G20 Summit at Los Cabos in Mexico.

Hollande met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi and Sushma Swaraj of the opposition BJP in Delhi.

On February 15, Hollande delivered a lecture at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti House. Following that, he honoured Nobel laureate and renowned economist Amartya Sen with *Commandeur de la légion d'Honneur*.

France is arguably India's longest standing time-tested friend, save Russia. No doubt France has supplied weapons to Pakistan, but its relations with India are 300 years old and in the last 30 years have been highly positive.

In 1990, the visit by then-president Jacques Chirac was one of the milestones in bilateral relations. France sought to limit the impact of the US-led anti-India sanction regime following the nuclear tests in 1998.

It was France that supplied Mirage 2000 to India in 1981, when India wanted to upgrade its air force. It was the first to propose the integration of India into the global order, and has been the first and most vocal supporter for India's inclusion in the Security Council as a permanent member.

During the visit, India reportedly closed a \$12 billion deal with France for purchase of highly sophisticated 126 Dassault Rafale combat fighters.

Both sides are in negotiations for collaboration between India's state-run Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) and Dassault to assemble the plane in India. The initial 18 aircraft will reportedly be supplied in a fly-away condition, while the remainder will have to be assembled by HAL in India. The deal could be signed in April. India already uses Dassault's Mirage 2000 fighter jets.

France and India are working jointly on upgrading India's missile technology. France was also the first to

sign a civilian nuclear deal with India in 2008. India is now building a 10,000MW producing nuclear power complex at Jaitapur (Maharashtra) with French technical cooperation.

*The Times of India* observed that the visit was a good time to move the engagement from one that is still tactical and transactional to one that is more strategic and sustainable in the following ways:

- The first is to realign cooperation in the defence sector. India may jointly develop drones and unmanned combat aerial vehicles needed for the asymmetric battlefields of the 21st century;
- It must strive to unleash the market potential and entrepreneurial dynamism of the Indian private sector in tandem with French capabilities;
- The local subsidiary of DCNS, a French company, has already teamed up with private Indian defence component manufacturers to co-produce equipment for Scorpene class submarines;
- France must work with the Europeans and the US to facilitate India's entry into the Nuclear

Suppliers Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Australia Group and the Wassenaar Arrangement. Membership of the four regimes will allow partnerships and development of new markets in the large high-tech sector for defence and civilian applications;

- Without access to enrichment of uranium-plutonium technology, the growth of nuclear energy in the country will remain modest and India's ability to emerge as supplier of a full range of nuclear services will be limited. France is the most obvious partner to acquire enrichment technology from;
- France has long been an Indian Ocean power with numerous bases in the region. A Franco-Indian vision document on the strategy of security of the Indian Ocean could be a vital first step towards developing a cooperative framework for stability and security in the region.

France and India are cooperating in higher education and the current plan is to send 4,000 Indian students to study in French universities. Trade last year was only \$7.5 billion, and France buys more than it sells.

The trip is Hollande's first to Asia since taking office in May last year and both Indian and French officials say the mission underscores the importance France attaches to ties with India.

"It is also a standalone visit to India and hence it is a clear sign of the commitment from the French to continue to strengthen the strategic partnership with India," Rakesh Sood, Ambassador of India to France, reportedly said. There is also an implied satisfaction among Indians that French president visited India ahead of China.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

# To Shahbagh

MOYUKH MAHTAB

**A**LL of a sudden going to Shahbagh became the thing to do, everyone was there, checking-in, posting pictures and calling for death of a criminal a lot of them did not know or care about till a day ago. We have always been a frantic generation, our patriotism during February and December is always forceful and short-lived. I laughed the first time I heard people call Shahbagh a square, it was clearly meant to imitate Tahrir or Tiananmen. I was annoyed at the streams of people I personally knew, who were going to Shahbagh because it was just the "in-thing" to do, not because they had strong feelings about the ongoing trial and the controversial verdict.

But I also realised how big this was for us, a generation whose apathy towards politics is phenomenal, and the marginal few who are involved in extremist student-politics the rest scorn and fear. We have been constantly taught not to get involved in it; the dirt that has accumulated was reason enough. And now the online world, where the whole thing supposedly began, is divided between the staunch supporters, the cynics, the complainers and the peanut munching crowd.

*The war ended ages ago, why make a big deal of it now?*

We have become a comfortably-ignorant and complacent generation who were force-fed either of the two versions of history. But everyone knows, more or less, of the atrocities, which have been called the most calculated extermination of a people since Nazi Germany, that the Pakistani army and the Razakar collaborators committed. The perpetrators of the crimes against humanity in Nazi Germany were tried within a year of the end of the war.

The Nuremberg Trials, the trials against the Khmer Rouge and the war crimes trials in Uganda all reflect the importance of justice when it comes to war crimes. This was not a single murder, the magnitude of these crimes is enormous and letting the criminals go free would be a blatant failure of the justice system. It is shameful that it took us this long to finally try these people, something Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee has been fighting for, for years.

*There are more pressing concerns at the moment*

The Facebook rants and counter rants about the importance of this, relative to other national matters, all follow the same route. The answer has always been that it has to start somewhere. What most people are forgetting is that this is the first time a student body has taken to the streets not because of a particular political ideology. If what Bangladesh lacks is an informed youth then this could very well be the start of a process to inform and involve them. The faces of the youth when they give the slogans, amidst the burning candles and displays by people from all walks of life to be part of this, show that solidarity is possible.

*It's all political/planned/anti-Islamic*

Jamaat gathered in Paltan arguing that the Shahbagh protests were politically motivated; cynics online argue how it's all planned out and futile; and some just reject the movement because it is anti-Islamic. Well, as first-hand accounts go, Shahbagh is filled with masses of students and the general people from the most common professions. This is a group of people who do not get involved in politics. Shahbagh is grouped into schools and colleges chanting for a death sentence in the midst of the glow of hundreds of candles. It is not political parties or exalting of any political figure that Shahbagh highlights, neither are the protests against any religion. The spontaneous participation, whether out of

**It is not political parties or exalting of any political figure that Shahbagh highlights, neither are the protests against any religion.**

anger, necessity or even conformity, has been only the verdict against Quader Mollah and a stand against Razakars and Jamaat.

*It is all a farce*

It was disheartening to read the Economist

article about the discrepancies in the procedures. There have been allegations of fast-tracking, abduction and coercion of defence witnesses. It's depressing that proper standards were not maintained and the trials may be questioned about their transparency. The crimes that the defendants stand accused of are heinous, and there would be an uncertainty about the trials if they were not completed during this government's tenure. But bending the law can never be justified. There should have been more talk of the standard of the tribunal, which only a few point out now. A protester from Shahbagh said: "If this is the best we get, I'll take it. I know these people are guilty, and even in an independent tribunal they would be."

*Why the bloodlust?*

Maybe emotions get the better of me, but even as someone who is against capital punishment, I am disappointed with the verdict. Maybe because the crimes were gruesome and there has never been any sign of redemption, the accused have the guts to raise two fingers in a sign of victory in a country they turned into a wasteland both intellectually and politically. When these people still dare to post videos online where they belittle the country and declare with pride that they are Razakars and Bangalis are slaves, when they come out to the streets threatening the country again, it is time for us to take a stand.

Religion based politics fosters dogma and communal hatred. The recent incidents of Jamaat beating up the police are a small demonstration of how big and nasty all this might get. The success of Shahbagh square does not depend on whether the verdict is changed or not, it will hopefully be about the fostering of a collective conscience, a public opinion against Jamaat and religion based politics. Maybe that is dreaming big, but then it just might be the start of something.

The writer is Spelling Bee reporter.

## The Observer

# Shahbagh reflected in London

NICK COHEN

**T**HE Shahbagh junction in Dhaka has become Bangladesh's Tahrir Square. Hundreds of thousands of young protesters are occupying it and raging against radical Islamists. Even sympathetic politicians cannot control the movement. The protesters damn them as appeasers, who have compromised with unconscionable men.

Theirs is a grassroots uprising for the most essential and neglected values of our age: secularism, the protection of minorities from persecution and the removal of theocratic thugs from the private lives and public arguments of 21st-century citizens.

Naturally, the western media show little interest in covering the protest. The indifference is all the more telling because the Shahbagh movement is a response to a crime westerners once deplored, but have almost forgotten.

The young in Dhaka have revolted over the war crimes trials of members of Jamaat-e-Islami. That useful leftwing term "clerical fascist" might have been invented to describe what they did. In 1971, the oppressed "eastern wing" of Pakistan rose against its masters to form Bangladesh. The Pakistani army responded with a campaign of mass murder and mass rape, which shocked a 20th century that thought it had seen it all. George Harrison and Ravi Shankar, the Bonos of their day, organised benefit concerts at Madison Square Garden. The murder of Hindus and Christians, the flight of refugees and the chance to

weaken Pakistan pushed Indira Gandhi into one of the finest actions of her murky career. She sent the Indian army to liberate the tortured land.

The Pakistani occupiers were helped at every stage by Islamist activists. Jamaat took its inspiration from Abul Ala Maududi who has as good a claim as anyone to be the founder of political Islam. Maududi wanted a global war to establish a caliphate. The break-up of Muslim Pakistan impeded the prospect of a world revolution. To prevent this reverse, his followers formed death squads to slaughter the intellectuals, engineers, administrators and teachers who could make an independent Bangladesh work. The outcome of a belated trial of handful of Jamaat war criminals has set Bangladesh on fire.

As with popular revolts throughout history, Bangladeshi liberals are in two minds about the Shahbagh demonstrations. On the one hand, they cannot fail to admire the determination of the young to state loudly and clearly that "religion-based politics had poisoned society," as Zafar Sobhan, editor of the Dhaka Tribune put it. On the other, the demonstrators are saying with equal force that they want the death penalty, that most anti-liberal of punishments, applied to the war criminals without mercy.

Do I hear you say that Bangladesh is far away and the genocide was long ago? Not so far away. Not so long ago. And

the agonies of Bangladeshi liberals are nothing in comparison to the contradictions of their British counterparts.

The conflict between the Shahbagh and Jamaat has already reached London. On February 9, local supporters of the uprising demonstrated in Altab Ali Park, a rare patch of green space off the Whitechapel Road in London's East End. They were met by Jamaatis. "They attacked our men with stones," one of the protest's organis-

**The most bracing effect of the demonstrations in Dhaka and London is that the terror is not being forgotten and liberals are being forced to pick sides. Let us hope that they stop picking the wrong one.**

ers told me. "There were old people and women and children there, but they still attacked us."

The redoubtable organiser is undeterred. She and her fellow activists are going back to the park tomorrow for another demonstration. Her friends are worried, however. They asked me not to name her after unknown assailants murdered Ahmed Rajib Haider Shuvo, one of the leaders of the Dhaka rallies, on Friday.

Whitechapel was where socialists and Jews confronted the British Union of Fascists in clashes that leftists mythologise as a grand moment of anti-Nazi solidarity. While they still talk about the Battle of Cable Street and remember 1936, it is far from clear to me where today's

British left stands in relation to modern struggles against ultra-reactionaries.

Liberal multiculturalism contains the seeds of its own negation. It can either be liberal or multicultural but it can't be both. Multiculturalism has not meant a defence of all people's rights to practise their religions and speak their minds without suffering racial or sectarian hatred. As events have turned out, it has led to official society picking the pushiest group of "community leaders" and honouring them.

In the case of British Islam, the anointed group was Jamaat-e-Islami, even though its British members included men accused of war crimes in Bangladesh. It was as if the establishment had decided that Opus Dei represented British Catholicism or Shiv Sena represented British Hinduism or the most bigoted form of orthodox represented British Judaism. The scoundrel left led the way down this murky alley, as it leads the way into so many dark places. Ken Livingstone and George Galloway have backed the Jamaat-dominated East London mosque, and Islamic Forum Europe, the Jamaat front organisation that now controls local politics in Tower Hamlets.

But to concentrate on the dregs of the Labour movement is to miss the point. Whitehall has been as keen on dealing with the allies of war criminals. Many East Enders have noticed that the Metropolitan Police seems less than anx-

ious to follow up reports of menacing "Muslim patrols" or threats to drinkers at gay bars.

The moderate Muslims at the Quilliam Foundation told me that the status Britain had given to Jamaat helped push British Bangladeshis away from social democratic politics and towards radical Islam.

The British-Asian feminist Gita Sahgal launched the Centre for Secular Space last week to combat such indulgence of theocratic obscurantism. She told me that Jamaat perverts traditional faith and she should know. Not only did she name alleged Jamaat war criminals living in Britain for Channel 4 in the 1990s, she is also Jawaharlal Nehru's great niece and a distant relative of the Indira Gandhi who sent the army into Bangladesh. I admire Sahgal and Quilliam hugely, but they are mistrusted, even hated by orthodox leftwingers. The feeling is reciprocated in spades and perhaps you can see why.

Many do not want to talk about Bangladesh massacres that moved liberal opinion to outrage in the 1970s, just as many did not want to talk about Saddam Hussein's gassing of the Kurds in the run-up to the second Iraq war. These are politically inconvenient genocides they would rather forget.

The most bracing effect of the demonstrations in Dhaka and London is that the terror is not being forgotten and liberals are being forced to pick sides. Let us hope that they stop picking the wrong one.

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