

# What undersize Bangladesh can do with excess population

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

BDHGHDFH is an oddity. Roughly the size of Nepal and the US state of Iowa (56,980 square miles), Bangladesh packs over 160 million people. Nepal's population is 26.5 million, Iowa's only 3 million. The population densities of adjacent India and Myanmar are a fraction of Bangladesh's.

From Pakistan westward to North Africa, the whole region is Muslim. Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia are Muslim majority nations embedded within non-Muslim neighbours.

During his negotiations with Lord Mountbatten, leading to the partition of India in 1947, Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah had famously warned against a "moth-eaten Pakistan." His demand was partially granted. The boundary of "West Pakistan" (today's Pakistan) does not look that moth-eaten; but, the moths seem to have feasted on the border of "East Pakistan" (today's Bangladesh), resulting in its diminutive size.

Size matters. One could argue that one of the myriads of reasons why the "West Pakistanis" looked down upon the "East Pakistanis" was the latter's petit size, notwithstanding its larger population. Pakistan is 6 times bigger than Bangladesh. Myanmar is 4.5 times and India 22 times larger.

People are partially judged by where they come from. The stature of a person from a small country is somewhat diminished in our mind. No one is afraid of someone from Liechtenstein or Luxembourg! Singapore may be an economic powerhouse, but its puny size does not strike fear in anyone. Israel is an exception only because for all practical purposes it is America.

So what is a small, and consequently weak, nation to do? April 23 was Shakespeare's 450th birthday, but the "secular prophet" has no advice for small nations. To be fair, nation states did not exist in Shakespeare's time. But, our own Shakespeare, Rabindranath Tagore, does offer some encouragement. Addressing the oppressor (the British), in the Rabindra Sangeet *Bidhir Bidhan*, the poet extraordinaire reassures the weak: "Ache Bol Durbolero" (the weak, too, has strength). However, in the next line he solicits the protection of the deity: "Haw-o na Jotoi Boro Aachen Bhagoban" (however powerful you may be, there is God.) Tagore was probably referring to the moral power of the poor!

It was nice of President Obama to emphasise last week in Malaysia that all nations, large and small, are equal. Really? Isn't being smaller a curse? Just ask the Ukrainians! Apart from maintaining patriotic and powerful armed forces, or enjoying the absolute protection of a superpower like Israel does, there is not much a small nation can do to deter aggression from a bigger nation.

Bulging population does not make up for the lack of size. Bangladesh has 20 million more people than Russia, the world's largest nation. 116-times bigger than Bangladesh (not counting Crimea), Russia is the world's second most powerful nation. A large developing nation has a brighter future than a smaller one.

Since Bangladesh cannot increase its size, it is stuck with its burgeoning population. What Bangladesh does not need are more people. If Mr. Narendra Modi follows through with his trend and expels all the Bangladeshi immigrants in India back to Bangladesh, it will be a demographic catastrophe for Bangladesh!

What can Bangladesh do with its

excess population? The answer lies in our past. Boats brought many of our ancestors to these shores; boats carried some of them away.

Historically, people of southern Bangladesh, especially Noakhali, Feni and Chittagong, were adventurous. They plied the seas as cooks on ships. Seafaring is reflected in our literature, such as *Sareng Bou* by Shahidullah Kaiser, who, along with his equally talented filmmaker-novelist younger brother, Zahir Raihan, was born near Feni.

Our ancestors were equally adventurous on land. There is a reason why Noakhali is nicknamed the "Royal District." During British rule every school was required to hire a Muslim religious/Arabic teacher. Invariably, he turned out to be from Noakhali, making the district omnipresent and kingly, thus "Royal!"

Last year, MIT Professor Vivek Bald, whose mother is Indian, published a revelatory book, *Bengali Harlem and Lost Histories of South Asian American*, documenting the earliest Indian immigrants to America.

Bald recounts the story of Fatima Shaik, an African American woman aged 61, whose grandfather, Shaik Mohamed Musa of Hooghly "immigrated" to the US in the 1890s. Those earliest Indian immigrants were peddlers who sold embroidered silk, cottons and exotic wares from the East.

The second wave, mostly seamen and merchant marines, arrived in the 1920s and 30s. Most were Muslim men from the British Indian province of Bengal. Since South Asian immigration to the US was illegal then, they all jumped ship. Mostly illiterate, they worked as cooks, dishwashers, street vendors and subway labourers. With no Muslim women around, they married African

American and Latino women, and became a part of those segregated communities. They never forgot their roots; always preferring fish curry over anything else.

Bald profiles Habib Ullah, a 14-year old boy from Noakhali, who went to Calcutta in the 1920s and found a job on a ship bound for America. In New York he married a Puerto Rican woman and became a part of that community. His son, Aladdin Ullah, a standup comedian, calls himself a "Banglarican." (Bangali+Puerto Rican.)

Student activist Ibrahim Chowdhury of Sylhet also left his homeland in the 1920s to evade the British CID, became a go to person for Bengalis in New York, and sired many children with his Puerto Rican wife.

Bangladeshi should emulate Shaik Musa, Habib Ullah and Ibrahim Chowdhury and turn Bangladesh's over-population from a liability into an asset by emigrating worldwide.

Adventures and emigration are in a Bangladeshi's DNA. These days Bangladeshis are everywhere. Jackson Heights and Hillside Avenue in New York City are Bangladeshi enclaves. A Bangladeshi cabbie drove a cousin of ours from the Anchorage airport in Alaska to her hotel. I will not be surprised if there are Bangladeshis living in Greenland! All of Bangladesh has now turned into a "Royal District!"

Ten million Bangladeshis were to emigrate, it will hardly make a dent in Bangladesh's population. But, those ten million people will not only send millions of foreign exchange back home, they will also form a formidable lobby for their motherland against any foreign invasion or exploitation.

The writer is a Rhodes Scholar.

# Rewriting history for vengeance

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

"The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history." -George Orwell

ON March 25, 1971, when hell's gates were opened and the marauding Pakistan army launched its war on the civilians of Dhaka, I was in Munshiganj, about twenty miles from Dhaka physically, but practically hours away because it was connected only by water with Dhaka at that time. As Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) of Munshiganj then, I was tethered to my job during the entire non-cooperation movement called by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, attending to only urgent law and order work as directed by him. I had returned only two days before the crackdown, after a meeting at Dhaka with the deputy commissioner, without a clue of the Pakistan army's diabolic plan that would be unfolded soon.

The first clue of the dastardly attack on Dhaka came to us when Dhaka Betar Kendro (rechristened name of Radio Pakistan, Dhaka, during non-cooperation movement) stopped broadcasting patriotic Bengali songs and instead reverted to its original moniker with dire messages from General Yahya. This was followed by messages from police in Dhaka to their counterparts in Munshiganj, and from relatives of town people trapped in Dhaka. Rumour of massive death and destruction and impending strike of Pakistan army on Munshiganj town panicked the people. This state of panic would continue for two days, only to be aggravated by stories of Pakistan army's horrific acts from people who fled Dhaka after the curfew was lifted there.

An incident occurred in Munshiganj when people of the town were driven to extreme anxiety with the prospect of an army attack looming large. A band of local political leaders came to see me in my office seeking some advice on what to do. Among them was the elderly local president of Pakistan Muslim League. In a clear and emphatic voice, the man who claimed he had raised the flag of Pakistan on August 14, 1947 said to me: "This is not the Pakistan that we wanted. We will resist." Going a step further he added: "Let the Indian army march in. It will probably save us."

The statement by him was perhaps an emotional outburst made at a moment of extreme anxiety and possibility of meeting a dire fate like the people in Dhaka two days before. But the feeling he expressed at that time was shared by almost everyone who had lived through that period in the then East Pakistan, irrespective of religious identity. Pakistan, which was built on the hopes and aspirations of the majority of the Muslims of East Bengal, had stumbled face forward. It was no more a country for the Bengalis. They had been targeted as enemies. The people who helped create Pakistan were now treated as traitors. Even those Bengali Muslims who would later collaborate with Pakistani authorities were suspects in the eyes of the Pakistani army, and they knew it.

In the nine month period of occupation most people of the then East Pakistan went through a common fate of living in horror, under a constant threat of either death or confinement. The army did not spare towns or villages from pillage and arson based on religious or party affiliation. An ironic example of such wholesale punishment was burning of the house of the Muslim League president of Munshiganj only because his son was the security officer of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The other instance was the army's burning of a whole village in the same subdivision suspected as a hideout of freedom fighters.

Barring a small segment of the population that was motivated by religious ideology, and a few political opportunists who thought they would gain from Pakistani rule, the whole of Bangladesh was united by the common goal of attaining freedom from an oppressive power. In fact, our freedom could not have been obtained in that short period only with India's intervention. It was possible because people across the entire political spectrum, Right to Left, gave their overwhelming support to this fight from within. They all believed in a free Bangladesh and gave unequivocal support to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's call, starting from the day it was broadcast. The call was the inspiration that people would listen to repeatedly in clandestine radios in villages and towns. There was no one, including those who had once opposed Sheikh Mujib politically, who would deny at that time either this call or the leader who had made the call for freedom. This is our history.

Today, some forty plus years later, divisive forces that were responsible for upholding the failed cause of a failed country seem to be rearing their heads and attempting to rewrite history. They are poised to mislead the country with nonsensical claims that need to be put to rest. Revisionist history has never paid in the past, and it will not work in the future. For this, however, we need timely awakening and nipping of these attempts in the bud with proper guidance and education of our people, our youth in particular.

The writer is a former civil servant.

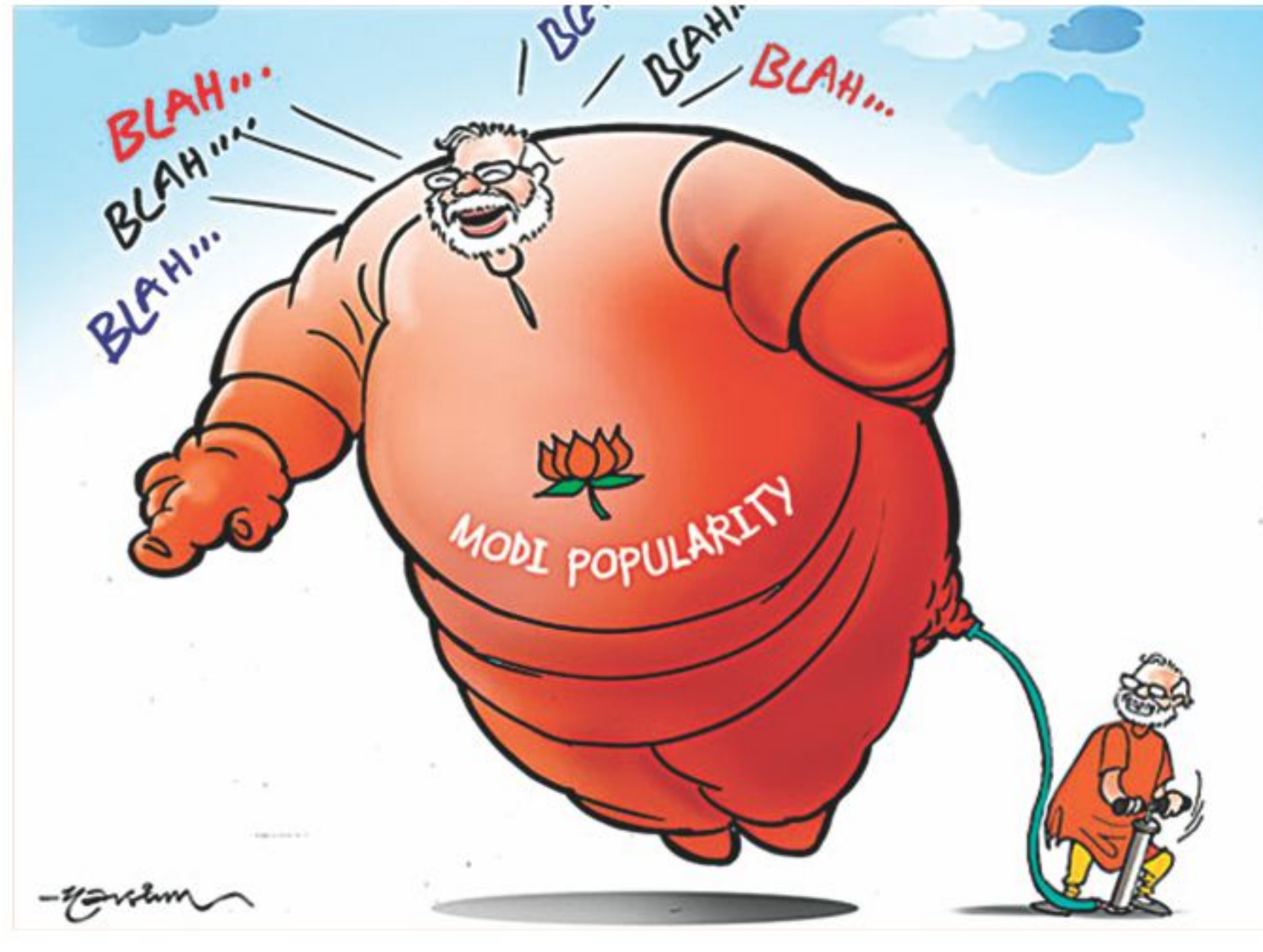
# Learning to live with Modi

SARWAR JAHAN CHOWDHURY

THIS Indian election appears to be as much about a person as issues. Indian media, with a tacit agreement, is clearly promoting him as the most capable person available for the top executive position of the country. A kind of paranoia surrounding Narendra Modi's potential rise to Indian premiership has also been deliberately fashioned by Indian media just to make the drama as interesting as the Star TV soaps.

There is a gap between hype and truth. The extreme doomsayers fail to understand that in the Indian system there are embedded checks and balances, and no leader can change it too much, let alone turn it upside down. The moderates within BJP are supposed to be a counterbalance to a perceived right-wing Modi. The secular forces of India and relatively strong liberal intelligentsia are there as the next layer of check and balance anyway.

But domestically, Mr. Modi himself seems to have learned to be a little smarter than he previously was. Coupled with the lure of the premiership laid in front of him, the extensive and critical media focus on him, for reasons right or wrong, has worked as self-fulfilling prophesy to a considerable degree -- forcing Modi to become moderate. He blended whatever development he did in Gujarat with implied Hindutva. That did wonders for him in elections in his own province for an unprecedented three consecutive times. He and the BJP are now using a customised version of this success formula at national level. The 'Hard Hindutva' has been turned to implicit 'Soft Hindutva' to keep the core Hindu votes aboard and the economic slogans like 'Development for All', 'Gujarat Model', 'Bikash Purush' (Development



Messiah) etc. have occupied the forefront to reach out to the youth and wider strata of the society.

Mr. Modi and his BJP electoral team is almost solely talking about development. 'Ram Temple' issue has been relegated to small space in the last page of BJP election manifesto and, for the first time, the BJP is saying the issue would be solved within constitutional framework. He may not be a moderate per se nor have the education to metamorphose to a liberal. Becoming moderate ostensibly is simply a shrewd rational choice for him.

But there is another story of the highly publicised 'Gujarat Developmental Model'. BJP's ex-alliance partner Chief Minister Nitish Kumar of Bihar and their own Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan have better developmental records than the showy urban constructions that Modi facilitated. But they

perhaps don't command right wing Hindu votes as Modi does. Modi hasn't abandoned Hindutva. He has enshrined Hindutva in him to an unbreakable bondage so that he can do with less rhetoric these days.

Narendra Modi is also an opportunist. He has already started showing his true colour regionally. It doesn't seem that he has much clue of the reality of regional, international and strategic affairs. He has recently started repeating his typical rhetorical tone for regional audience without comprehending the ramifications.

He is openly advocating aggressive policies like cross-border counter terrorist operation by India and also spouting anti-neighbour rhetoric. The danger is, if one promises something too explicitly during a campaign, the pressure for deliverance after the triumph is heavy. His anti-Pakistan rhetoric doesn't matter much, because the Pakistanis are far

more extreme than him. Now he has picked the seemingly softer target -- Bangladesh -- the neighbour that happened to be a strategic ally of India for the last five years and addressed India's key security concerns.

Modi's unequivocal assertion to send the so-called Bangladeshis in India back to Bangladesh is nothing but an act of a desperate demagogue and has gone beyond mere rhetoric. He has simply been dishonest in speaking only some distorted bits of truth. It's not that he or his advisors aren't aware of the injustice perpetrated by India in terms of denying Bangladesh its crucial life line -- river waters -- year after year. Agriculture in Bangladesh has been seriously affected due to salinity caused by sea water and lack of natural water flow essential for irrigation. That has perhaps caused some economic migration; but it's more or less clear what induced it. If one causes some harm, he himself ought to be prepared to bear the brunt. Blatant assertions divorced from the context only compound an issue and provoke reactions.

Indians, with their established system and safeguards, would perhaps be okay with Modi domestically. But regionally and internationally, this half-educated street activist turned prospective prime minister of India has hardly any sense of geo-strategic nuances. A perilous situation would arise if he ignores the advice of the prudent strategists in the euphoria of his potential electoral triumph and starts being assertive in an area he does not fathom.

There is no certainty that Modi would readily understand the language of civility, smart diplomacy and good neighbourliness.

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QUOTABLE Quote Life is nothing but a competition to be the criminal rather than the victim. Bertrand Russell

## CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS: 1 Iowa city, 5 Courtsport, 10 Washes, 12 Cupid's missile, 13 Gamespot, 14 Good judgment, 15 Darling of baseball, 16 Pool unit, 18 Put away, 19 Multipiece artwork, 21 Dance move, 22 New England storm, 24 Many an arty movie, 25 Software surprise, 29 Reasonable, 30 Classic car, 32 Place of refuge, 33 MoMA setting, 34 Spoil, 35 Trap, 37 "Crazy" singer. DOWN: 1 Burglar's bane, 2 Strand, 3 "Just the same...", 4 Capitol Bldg., 5 Door fastener, 6 Mine material, 7 Florid, 8 Wall art, 9 Check for bugs, 11 Conspicuous, 17 West Point, e.g., 20 Happen, 21 Spirited horse, 23 Hot wind from Africa, 25 Bread-winner, 26 Turkey's capital, 27 May sign, 28 Quick look, 29 One of the Obama daughters, 31 Kilmer poem.

CRYPTOQUOTE: GWHIN HEC MIWJ QMMZ BIKCIKBMIN AIWCNN KOCJ BSSCZBHKCWJ ZQCQICEHKC BIKM OHEZ ZMER. --GCKCEZAPRCE. Yesterday's Cryptoquote: KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING. LOVE WHAT YOU ARE DOING. AND BELIEVE IN

## Yesterday's answer

TOPIC TAPER, AROSE ALIVE, PELTS CECIL, ELL ANTENNA, USE REFICY, PENS DUNCE, BUM LAB, LABOR PAWS, SOS IAM SET, TAKESTOKIR, OVERT OMEGA, RETIE CATHY, ESSEN HOSTS.

## BEETLE BAILEY

Cartoon by Mort Walker. I'M HAVING TROUBLE SLEEPING. I JUST CAN'T SEEM TO SETTLE DOWN. HAVE YOU HAD ANY TROUBLE WITH STOMACH GAS?

## HENRY

Cartoon by Don Trachte. A XYDLBAXR is LONGFELLOW. One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

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