

Voting for Parliament

A tale of two countries

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

ELECTIONS to the Parliament in the largest democracy of the world are over; a new government has stepped in led by the party that received an overwhelming majority in the new parliament. Although the results were forecast by political pundits long before the elections were actually held, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its charismatic leader Narendra Modi are now basking in the adulation of their exultant supporters and voters of India. And they should, because the success of the party and its leaders is not confined to the work they did, it is also a tribute to the system that allowed its citizens unfettered exercise of the right to vote. A total of over 600 million (69%) out of more than 814 million voters exercised their rights to choose from a list of 8,251 candidates representing 22 political parties. The choice was unlimited, but people chose who they trusted more. This is democracy of the people, for the people, and by the people.

Only five months before, Bangladesh also had a parliamentary election for its 92 million voters. As in India, it was a chance for them to choose a party and a leader of their choice through ballot box. But instead of an election what we ended up with was a virtual selection. Instead of a long list of choices, majority of the voters ended up with no choice at all except a sole candidate who would face no contest at all. We ended up with 153 members of the parliament out of 300 hundred who the voters did not have to vote for; those members faced no opposition.

In India, the winning alliance won 336 seats out of 543 (BJP alone 282 seats) an impressive win under any circumstances. These votes were not rigged nor obtained through manipulation either by the party or the agency that oversaw the elections. The votes that were cast were an outpouring of support for the candidates of people's choice. In Bangladesh, the winning party reportedly received 74% of the votes, but then more than half of these votes did not need to be cast. This is only a statistics to account for all voters irrespective of whether they actually cast their votes or not. In India the voter turnout was 69%; in Bangladesh the official report stated the turnout to be 48%, but it did not clarify whether the statistics included voters in areas of no contest.

Many people may observe, and rightly so, that this comparison between India and Bangladesh is pointless. For starters, the last Bangladesh election was in reality more technical than real. The elections were held purportedly to fulfill a constitutional requirement to avoid a vacuum in government. But these were held against both internal opposition and external disapproval. It was boycotted by several political parties including the major opposition that had secured around 35% of votes in the previous (2008) elections. Why compare?

A comparison between India and Bangladesh becomes necessary if at least to show the essential difference between having a democracy that is truly functional and a democracy that is nominal. India has a democratic tradition that actually that goes back before independence of 1947. Even under colonial rule undivided India had elections for provinces that were fought by domestic political parties. These traditions were carried into India after independence and were nurtured and strengthened for decades. These traditions and the institutions that went along with them let democracy flourish and prosper in India. But even though we are different countries now we also had inherited these traditions which we have unfortunately squandered away.

Fight for independence of Bangladesh was not only for political and economic freedom, but also for establishing a truly democratic country. Democracy is one of our four state principles. Unfortunately, this country had seen from time to time stifling of democracy by rulers who were modeled after Pakistani traditions. Yet, our people have fought and brought back democracy, sometimes with their lives.

India may not yet have the most ideal democratic society, but it has a functional democracy that allows it to have successful elections every five year with unfettered participation by all. We may be a long way from India but we can at least move away from nominal democracy if our leaders have the intent. We cannot claim we have democracy in the country when democratic traditions of free and fair elections are denied. We cannot claim we have democracy when institutions that guard democracy are stifled, politicised, or rendered dysfunctional.

Democracy is a state of mind that is reflected in words and practices of those who believe in it. Law alone cannot sustain it unless people at the helm and those around them believe and practice democracy. Otherwise, we will continue to have selections and no election.

The writer is a US based political analyst and commentator.

TEESTA WATER SHARING

Relevance of UN Convention on International Watercourses 1997

M. INAMUL HAQUE

PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina held a meeting with high officials of the water ministry on May 11. She said that Teesta water sharing agreement was finalised but it could not be signed due to opposition from Mamata Banarjee, the chief minister of Paschim Banga. It is likely that the matter will be pursued with the new government in India. However, the contents of the agreement that was to be signed in September 2011 remain a mystery. Mamata Banarjee termed it as 'eyewash' and declined to agree. Since then, several versions of the agreement were discussed in the media, but none could be confirmed.

Our concern is that we are getting no released water from the Gazaldoba Barrage during winter since 2011; only the regenerated flow from the 70

deposited this instrument. Here, we shall try to figure out the pertinent issues of Teesta waters which have relevance to the UN Convention on International Watercourses 1997.

Article 2 of the Convention states: "(a) 'Watercourse' means a system of surface waters and ground waters constituting by virtue of their physical relationship a unitary whole and normally flowing into a common terminus; (b) 'International watercourse' means a watercourse, parts of which are situated in different States..." Teesta being an International watercourse is listed among the 54 common rivers to both India and Bangladesh. It has a basin comprising of surface and groundwater systems with an area of about 30,000 sq km, out of which 10,000 sq km are in India and 20,000 sq km in Bangladesh. The groundwater of Barind area falls under this basin (Teesta Fan) and is recharged by Teesta water on an annual basis.



km downstream riverbed is arriving towards the Teesta Barrage. Teesta is an international river so, as per UN Convention on International Watercourse 1997, some norms have to be followed by the basin states in utilising the resources.

The UN convention on Non-navigational uses of International Watercourses was passed in the UN General Assembly, on May 21 1997, with 103 votes in favour and 3 votes against. Bangladesh was in favour, Pakistan and India abstained, China, Turkey and Burundi opposed. The convention was open for ratification, acceptance, approval or accession by its member states. It needed ratification by 35 members to become international law. Vietnam was the 35th state to accede, on May 19, 2014, and the convention shall enter into force on the ninetieth day after the deposit of such instrument of ratification, acceptance, approval or accession, with the Secretary General of the UN. Bangladesh has not yet

Article 5 of the Convention states: "(1) Watercourse States shall in their respective territories utilise an international watercourse in an equitable and reasonable manner. In particular, an international watercourse shall be used and developed by watercourse States with a view to attaining optimal and sustainable utilisation thereof and benefits therefrom, taking into account the interests of the watercourse States concerned, consistent with adequate protection of the watercourse." This convention allows watercourse states to utilise their waters in an equitable and reasonable manner, but says in Article 7: "(1) Watercourse States shall, in utilising an international watercourse in their territories, take all appropriate measures to prevent the causing of significant harm to other watercourse States." This article establishes right of the people depending on historical flow.

India has constructed several dams and barrages

on the tributaries of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers and many are under construction. These dams are holding back the river water and the barrages are diverting the historical flow of the rivers, causing significant harm to the people of Bangladesh and its economy. In this respect Article 7 further says: "(2) Where significant harm nevertheless is caused to another watercourse State, the States whose use causes such harm shall, in the absence of agreement to such use, take all appropriate measures, having due regard for the provisions of Articles 5 and 6, in consultation with the affected State, to eliminate or mitigate such harm and, where appropriate, discuss the question of compensation."

Bangladesh has the right to ask India to pay compensation for the significant harm caused to its western region and its estuaries by the Farakka Barrage. Teesta dams in Sikkim are adding to this. Reduction of winter flow has reduced crop production, caused fish loss in the rivers, increased irrigation cost, and affected hilsa and brackish water prawn breeding. The food chain of human beings is being damaged, and habitat of many ground and aquatic animals are being lost. This loss needs to be quantified in terms of money and should be on the table for negotiation. The Indian government always says "no harm shall be done to Bangladesh," but harm is being done.

India is not only building dams on the common rivers with Bangladesh, it also wants to implement the River Interlink Project which will transfer a huge quantity of water from its eastern region to western and southern regions. This project is against the natural flow and shall have catastrophic effects on the Bengal basin. Article 11 of the convention says: "Watercourse States shall exchange information and consult each other and, if necessary, negotiate on the possible effects of planned measures on the condition of an international watercourse." We have a Joint Rivers Commission for this purpose but it is not effective.

People living in the basin and dependant on a river for thousands of years have historical right on its flow. But governments sometimes intervene in the river flow in the name of development or to give benefit to others, causing loss to the people with historical rights on the river flow. Article 12 of the convention says: "Before a watercourse State implements or permits the implementation of planned measures which may have a significant adverse effect upon other watercourse States, it shall provide those States with timely notification thereof. Such notification shall be accompanied by available technical data and information, including the results of any environmental impact assessment, in order to enable the notified States to evaluate the possible effects of the planned measures."

Bangladesh will have a tough time with India in dealing with the waters of our common rivers. The UN convention on Non-navigational uses of International Watercourses of 1997 establishes historical right on the river flow of the people of the basin states, so it is very relevant to us.

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QUOTABLE Quote

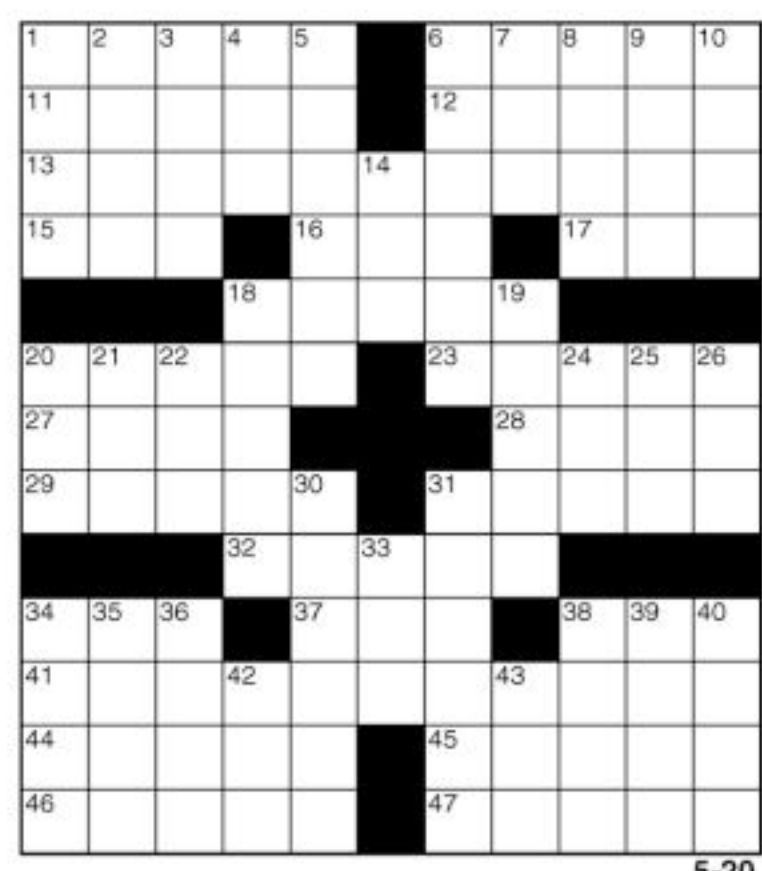
Mankind will never see an end of trouble until... lovers of wisdom come to hold political power, or the holders of power... become lovers of wisdom

Plato

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- 1 Unstated
 - 6 Rock unit
 - 11 Tolerate
 - 12 Wonder-land guest
 - 13 Fail at a diet
 - 15 Messy room
 - 16 Uno doubled
 - 17 Behold
 - 18 Fine, to NASA
 - 20 Belong
 - 23 Defy authority
 - 27 Gung-ho
 - 28 Extra amount
 - 29 Used a keyboard
 - 31 Alamo setting
 - 32 Emergency sound
 - 34 Emergency broadcast
 - 37 Day warmer
 - 38 Hunk of gum
 - 41 Warn
 - 44 Sky blue
 - 45 Violinist's stuff
 - 46 Maguire of "The Great Gatsby"
 - 47 Run-down
- Down**
- 1 Lights-out tune
 - 3 Mayor's domain
 - 4 Wedding words
 - 5 Muscle connector
 - 6 Roman ruler
 - 7 -- Baba
 - 8 Equips
 - 9 Dull pain
 - 10 Henri's head
 - 14 Bowl-shaped pan
 - 18 Helpers
 - 19 Nation on the Red Sea
 - 20 Diet no-no
 - 21 Wall climber
 - 22 Waiter's reward
 - 24 Compete in the ring
 - 25 Memorable time
 - 26 French article
 - 30 Noted name in animation
 - 31 Some singers
 - 33 Sprint
 - 34 Miner argument
 - 35 Greek liqueur
 - 36 Ticket half
 - 38 Judicious
 - 39 Litmus reddener
 - 40 Turn down
 - 42 Mine rock
 - 43 Bunion spot



CRYPTOQUOTE

SEKCK GM, ZBSC K ZJJ, Z LGDQ NB
EZOO GDKMM GD RDEZOO GDKMM,
GB GS'M SEK CGVES RDEZOO GDKMM.

-- HNDZSEZD BCZDUKD

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: DON'T TREAT YOUR
HEART LIKE AN ACTION FIGURE WRAPPED IN
PLASTIC AND NEVER USED.

-- AMY POEHLER

Yesterday's answer



A XYDLBAAXR 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.

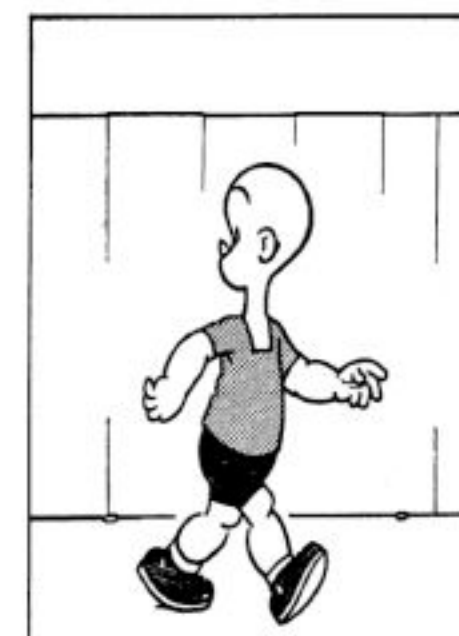
BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



HENRY

by Don Trachte



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