

A narrow spectrum of debate

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"The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum."
—Noam Chomsky, *The Common Good* (1998)

SOMETIMES it seems that Bangladeshis have been debating the same thing over and over again, failing to reach any consensus and only driving deeper wedges between the people. Consider that the headlines of the past decade are not very different from the one you are reading today. Yes, there are new phrases, events and figures; but the issues remain the same. And this pins us down to pointless, zero-

decades. Readers may note how the scenario presents us with two acceptable opinions, but allows lively debate within that spectrum.

Another never-ending and zero-sum debate is the question of 'Bangalee' versus 'Bangladeshi' national identities. It is difficult to write about this without being misunderstood and/or labeled as partisan, but I am nevertheless going to try. Unless qualified by what each entails, the terms in and of themselves convey no meaning. There is no value in philosophical grouping of populations, unless such categories are used to allocate state membership, protection, opportunities and resources. Still in the Bangalee-Bangladeshi debate, people toe the party line without engaging in self-reflection and critical questioning: how

In modern Bangladesh, the tension of generating consent is heightened by the presence of broad, democratic ideals. Theoretically, the process of consolidating mono-myths is at odds with diverse stories, viewpoints and narratives ushered in by democracy. It is through the interaction of these two that nations find their identities. There is no doubt that Bangladesh is at this very critical juncture.

What is disappointing is Bangladeshis' inability to escape narrow debates with predefined positions. Let me provide an example. The Shahbag Movement of 2013 was initially heralded as the 'Bangla Spring'. The most common narrative goes that it took off with a lot of promise, but was entangled in political maneuvers soon after. While

Baba. Surreptitiously, an important conversation was subverted and channelled toward ancient binaries.

It is time to reflect on why Bangladesh still remains so mired in historic debates. Political analyst and commentator Zia Hassan in a recent post questioned why the laundering of Tk. 76,000, routine deaths from road mishaps or the lack of playgrounds for children are not issues for opposition parties – but the exact number of deaths in the Independence War of 1971 is. There are dozens more deserving issues – ranging from building safety to dying rivers and forced prostitution – that need attention and action, but are seldom covered with any enthusiasm. We need to ask ourselves, why is this so?

Historic debates are sustained through political strategy, propaganda, politicisation of civil society and failure of media to shape fresh, pragmatic agendas. A semi-literate population, cleaved along lines of historic allegiances, provides the ideal base for sustaining age-old controversies.

In layman terms, democratic action – as understood beyond mere elections – is informed by media and civil society, and carried out by citizen activists. All three, along with political rivals, act as pressure groups in order to influence policy outcomes. But what happens when these functions and relationships change? I argue that three major changes are disrupting the check and balance inherent in democracy.

The first trend is increasing self-censorship by media, stemming from the fear of backlash from beneficiaries of the current system. With the corporatisation of media, journalists and analysts have turned more risk-averse, content to ensure job-security. More importantly, over-reliance on advertising revenue compromises media's role and effectiveness as a critic of the establishment. Quite recently, two large print-electronic outlets learnt this lesson the hard way. The influence wielded by such control over media earnings gives authorities the power to shape conversations and recommend analysts and commentators (who in turn shape the agenda). The media now has less motivation to challenge existing paradigms.

The second trend is a weakening of the link between public 'opinion' and 'activism'. At the heart of this weakening, lie the degradation of 'news' and the very nature of how citizens utilise the information that they are given. Readers will appreciate that the Age of Information is also the Age of Misinformation. There are now unsubstantiated reports, unverified

videos, unsubstantiated analyses and un referenced arguments floating around on the Internet. There are satire pieces being peddled as facts. There is hate speech being advanced as rational thinking. Given the human tendency to pick up facts and arguments that support their own worldview, all political cliques are busy amassing evidence on their side without verification or critical thinking.

What is done with media information has also changed radically. As the population becomes connected via the internet, less and less people seem to be interested in physical activism. Instead, the inherent human need to protest and reform is being fulfilled by making online posts. These posts garner 'likes' and 'comments' alright – but seldom emerge out of the ether into physical reality.

Citizens' inability to translate information and analyses into political action means journalists now have little incentive to play the critic, to keep widening the range of discourse and reporting on the various issues of national development. The cost of antagonising prevailing powers remains the same, but the reward (citizen awareness and activism) has dwindled. It makes agenda shaping a less rewarding, less useful preoccupation.

Thirdly, in the age of social media, there is also a personal cost of critiquing the establishment and dominant narratives. Social incentive to conform has been very high. Broadband labelling as war-criminal sympathiser is rampant. Organised maligning campaigns against dissenters have reached Goebbelsian levels. Dissent is reward with, and only with, exclusion.

The only escape from the vicious cycle of rancid debates can come from judicious political leadership. Yet, the most prominent opposition leader has again rekindled the controversy of exact numbers from the 1971 genocide perpetrated by the Pakistan army. While no rational society should be opposed to scientific and rational inquiries into historical events, provocation for the sake of provocation is juvenile and counterproductive. The only broadening of horizons has come from an opposition stalwart who appallingly questioned the intelligence of martyred intellectuals of 1971 for endangering their own lives!

While we ignore this ignominy, let us also be grateful that the martyred visionaries had the integrity, courage and fortitude to risk their very lives; let us take a minute to thank our stars that they were not like today's leaders.

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PHOTO: KISHOR PAREKH

Still in the Bangalee-Bangladeshi debate, people toe the party line without engaging in self-reflection and critical questioning: how does this categorisation help achieve the development vision of Bangladesh?

sum controversies where the only winners are those trying to distract citizens.

The first announcer of independence is one such controversy that serves no practical purpose. In truth, the whole of Bangladesh proclaimed independence from an unfair and exploitative union: some through radios, some through songs and others through bullets. Whose voice came to provide an outlet for national sentiments is of little consequence. If a young major – at any point – conveyed a message from the leader of the struggle, it would make him a messenger. His proclamation on behalf of the leader does not make him equal or comparable to the leader. Each has his own place in history and will be remembered according to their character, integrity and deeds. Yet the controversy has haunted the nation for

does this categorisation help achieve the development vision of Bangladesh? What changes if a citizen changes his opinion?

Rather, all sides spar on blindly; loyally; instinctively. Such uncritical parroting of party lines, on all sides, is self-serving and no more than a reaffirmation of loyalty to political cliques.

To say that these ageing debates have no visible end in sight and add little value to domestic discourse is not to say that they should not take place, but merely that they should not be at the centre of all socio-political discourse. Binary controversies and stifling of alternative narratives are not at all unusual in countries in the process of generating national myths. In fact, the post-WWI era of nation states necessitated a process of differentiation, whereby nations had to stake out their unique mythology.

a core group survives, Shahbag's en masse urban middle-class support has waned. It is still important to note that the movement did not fail to fundamentally impact the culture, manner and language of popular protests.

The Shahbag Movement quickly lost impetus with the rekindling of an old controversy. The surge of nationalist sentiment was predictably countered with what is typically dubbed 'the Religion Card': any populist strategy that depicts a rival action (or inaction) as contrary to the dictates of religion. The 'atheist' controversy of 2013 was masterful, cunning and preyed easily on the naiveté of the God-fearing masses. Before the week ended, the electronic and digital media were abuzz with discussions about the religious orientation of bloggers (or lack thereof) and later, the murder of blogger Thaba.

The best year ever

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

THE gentleman boarding the flight in New Delhi looks awfully familiar – probably a friend of my dad's. Here's the dilemma – if I ask him who he is, that's bad manners. If I ignore him, I'm labeled as a *beyadob*. I take no chances. I grab his hand, shake

it vigorously, "Salaam Chacha!! How are you? So good to see you!" A perplexed, yet genuinely warm greeting in return. As the 'uncle' boards the plane, I ask my friend, "Who's he by the way?" "You idiot! He's the Governor of Bangladesh Bank!" Oops! No wonder he looks so familiar! Having a bad memory is one thing, trying to be smart with it is suicidal. And this is no lone incident. As I get off the stage after a comedy show, a gentleman compliments me on my performance and asks me what I do. I answer with a thank you and ask him the same question. "I am in the Army," he replies. I look him up and down, "Let me see.

You're a Brigadier General?" "I am Lt. Gen. Sarwardy." The gentleman breaks into a beam, knowing that only a comedian is capable of instantly demoting a three star general to a one star one at the stroke of one over-smart sentence. And finally, I am at the Bangabandhu Cantonment to do a comedy show. "Are you the CO (Commanding Officer – a position held by a Lt. Col.)?" I ask a fine young officer. "I was, many, many years ago. I am now the Brigade Commander."

History repeats itself as my *faux pas* demotes a one star general by two ranks to a lieutenant colonel. Perhaps all the Captains are now giving pushups, anticipating being demoted to gentlemen cadets and being sent back to the Military Academy. The life of a comedian – full of mis-steps, mis-statements, mis-judgments and mistakes. But perhaps 'comedian' is a misnomer for what is in essence a blatant truth teller. Humour is a delivery mechanism of truth with its efficacy at its peak when delivered with the best in class humour, no matter how sensitive the payload. All roads lead to Rome. If a truth needs to be told, it can be done by writing an Op-Ed, speaking (debating) on a talk show, bringing out a procession, creating blockades, calling a *hartal*, throwing a petrol bomb or vandalising a

car. But there is also humour, that can deliver the same truth, perhaps more effectively, as when one laughs, the eyes are shut and the mind is wide open, allowing the truth to embed itself in the mind of the recipient.

Again, therein lies the tremendous responsibility of the humourist, to laugh WITH everybody and not AT anyone's cost. That is the thin line that a comedian has to tread with caution.

After a show of mine in post 9/11 America at the Ann Arbor Showcase comedy club in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA, an American gentleman comes and shakes my hand, "Sir, I am a Warrant Officer of the US Army. I just returned from a two-year tour of duty in Iraq. I learned more about your religion [Islam] through your subtle comedy than I did during my deployment in Iraq. I want to thank you."

Mission accomplished. Make laugh, not war. Smile, grin, laugh. It doesn't cost a dime, nor is there any VAT on it. This mantra has given me the best calling and the best purpose in life.

Follow suit. May the year 2016 be the best year ever...

The writer is an engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA and CEO of IBM & Nokia Siemens Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ABC Radio's *Good Morning Bangladesh* and the founder of *Naveed's Comedy Club*. E-mail: naveed@naveedmahbub.com



QUOTABLE Quote

AUDRE LORDE
"Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference"
Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You [white women] fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you; we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs on the reasons they are dying.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Computer graphics program
- Lab aide of film
- Take out
- Infamous emperor
- Breathing need
- Realized
- Complain
- Blue hue
- Begat
- Saloon supply
- Tidal wave
- Football's Marino
- General activity
- "Mazel--!"
- Comfort
- Pilot's guess: abbr.
- Oscar winner Sophia
- Perfect place
- Meeting slate
- "Toodleeol!"
- Bested in a pie contest
- "Yeah, right!"
- Like the German "das"
- Hand over
- Sevilla's nation

DOWN

- Hit show letters
- Mojo
- Writer Ian
- Pooch
- Continually
- Gambling city
- Completes a comic
- Produced
- Mime material
- Squabble
- Loan shark's practice
- Tennis star Rafael
- Texas landmark
- Put on a pedestal
- Ham it up
- Long sofa
- Baling need
- Pluffed down
- Nullify
- Accept without question
- Less than any
- Membership cost
- Peculiarity
- Homer's dad
- loss
- Wallet bill

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

F	O	G	U	P	W	R	O	T	E	
A	B	A	S	E	H	U	M	I	D	
C	O	M	E	T	O	A	N	E	N	
T	E	E	N	U	T	N	A	Y		
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R	E	S	T	S		A	X	M	E	N