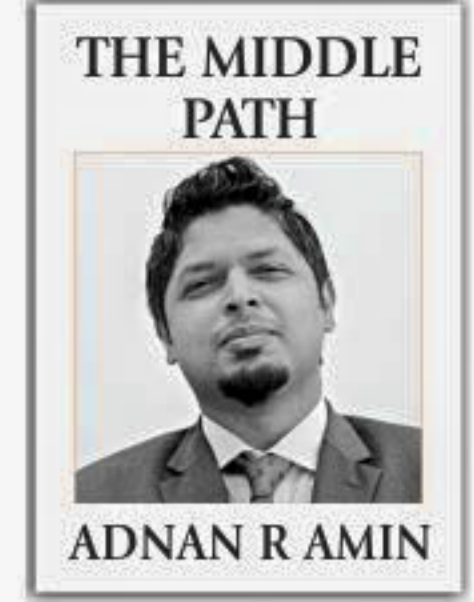


# The land of scared ideas



ADNAN R AMIN

**THE MIDDLE PATH**  
**S**IXTY or seventy years back, higher education for the people of Bengal was a rare commodity. Racial and socioeconomic barriers held locals back; as did sparse infrastructure and

low public spending on education. So, people who made it to college would become instant celebrities, representing their villages to the whole wide world. They became the talk of the village, representing their respective districts to the whole world and were often accorded heroes' welcome when they returned. Yet it would've been so easy to resent the educated, colonial upper-classes and their intellectual traditions! You see, in British India or early East Pakistan, getting an education was as much a struggle as it was an act of defiance. Thankfully, the common people adopted a unanimous, positive view of higher learning, even though they themselves may have remained unlettered.

Fast forward to the 21st century: there are now hints of anti-intellectualism in the air. Anti-intellectualism is a fear of or hostility towards intellectual disciplines and their practitioners. Think of it as xenophobia against the educated. Today, religious schools shun modern science. Secular schools prioritise GPA over learning. In public discourse, schools of thought that don't fit ideological narratives are undermined and cast aside. In our own reenactments of the Nicene Council, chronicles are cherished or thrown out based on who the writers are.

Today, alternative modes of analysis and strategising are viewed with suspicion. Numbers that disagree with official data are suppressed. Inconvenient

history is swept under the rug and new back-stories fabricated, to respectively endow or withdraw favour. Research that hints at corruption by lawmakers is considered seditious; or at least, agenda-driven. The full force of organised, populist armies is thrown at dissenters, who find themselves overwhelmed by its sheer quantity and vitriol.

No politician deigns to address serious questions or concerns of citizens; but every single one is positive that (s)he has their unquestioned support. The media limits itself to reporting events and documenting sensations and tragedies. On news items and comments, there is a palpable pressure to choose a side, instead of forming a nuanced, informed opinion. Also, "Beshi jaano?" (do you know more than me?) is now an acceptable reaction to almost all questions and arguments.

Talk-show discussants are now generally viewed as partisan, with the audience aware of their allegiances from the get-go. It is now possible to name 'experts' who will endorse (or criticise) a policy or law or person for you. Researching, analysing and ideation are not skills appreciated in either bureaucracy anymore. University teachers and civil society members are thought to change as administrations change (if that is so, there is no wonder that many such teachers are merely reflectors, and not the source, of knowledge). These shifts are not specific to a single party's reign; they represent a long accepted way of doing things. For those whose primary occupation is to work with ideas, there remains no last bastion, no last man standing.

It would seem like a strange development: why now - when millions more are educated (compared to 1946 for example) - should there be growing fear of the educated? We know that people fear what they don't understand. So, logically, there should have been more anti-intellectualism during

colonial times. But unnoticed and unmeasured, anti-intellectualism grows. It would be surprising if our politicians have any appetite for such developments. Having reaped the benefits of educated segments, recent administrations were supposed to be more accepting - and even nurturing - of dissent, rational thinking and public intellectual discourse. Yet here we are, wondering how to adapt our truth to the opinion of a few others.

Sadly, anti-intellectualism is neither new, nor geographically isolated. Hostility towards and persecution of intellectuals is rife in history: Copernicus and Bruno were killed for suggesting that the Earth was not the centre of the universe (15<sup>th</sup> century). Servetus, who correctly described blood circulation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was burned at the stake. Combustion theorist Lavoisier was guillotined during the French Revolution (1794). All of them represent targeted killing of intellectuals whose ideas threatened the status quo.

Around 1917, the Bolsheviks were persecuting Tsarist intellectuals. General Francisco Franco's 'White Terror' rampage murdered 200,000 civilians - mostly writers, artists, teachers and professors (1936-75). Having deposed the Argentinian government, its military quickly took to targeting and exiling thought-leaders of the university (1966). The Pakistani Army targeted and massacred our own visionaries, leaving them in innumerable found and lost mass graves (1971). Cambodia's Pol Pot ordered that 15 intellectuals be executed in each commune. It was 'thought purification'. Even people wearing glasses (i.e. with a possible habit of reading) would be put under arbitrary suspicion (1975-79). Nepal imprisoned intellectuals for non-violent protests (1987) and in the same year, Fiji's military government sent a dire warning to dissenting intellectuals

and shut down media outlets. Despite the #AwardWapsi movement, Modi's government has been called the most anti-intellectual Indian regime in history. There are dozens of other examples. Suffice it to hypothesise that anti-intellectualism peaks during times of conflict and tumult.

Banishing sound intellectual traditions from public life is taking a toll on the world. Today, there are serious debates about whether more guns will increase social security i.e. save more lives; or if more debt will resolve the debt crisis. The best practice in stopping overseas civil wars is injecting weapons and dropping bombs at the same time. Viewed as a whole, these indicate a dire dearth of new ideas. In the cult classic movie Idiocracy, in director Mike Judge's increasingly-stupid world, a wrestler was the POTUS and electoral democracy, little more than a spectacular reality show. Now visualise Donald Trump: punching his way to nomination; defending the proportions of his digits and reproductive organ in front of a mesmerised audience.

Philosopher John Searle suggested that radical movements reject the idea that knowledge is the means AND the end. Thus they come to hate both intellectualism and institutions that breed it. Knowledge, to such activists, is only important for taking action, and even then - not a very vital one. Searle continues, "Far more important than what one knows is how one feels." Blindly placing 'feelings' before 'thought' creates the perfect breeding environment for anti-intellectualism. Perhaps Isaac Asimov best summed it up when he wrote, "Anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that 'my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.'"

The writer is a strategy and communications consultant.

## High achievers in 'A' and 'O' levels

Remove impediments to higher education at home

**W**E hail the 1,915 'O' and 'A' level students from 85 schools across the country for their excellent performance. Competing internationally, eight of them have scored the highest mark in subjects as diverse as law, biology, chemistry, physics, accounting, mathematics and art and design. *The Daily Star*, in awarding these meritorious young men and women, acknowledges their merit and celebrates their immense potential and by extension, the nation's. They have done us proud.

Among those, like Deena Afroza Aziz who scored the highest mark in law in 'A' level, many want to become barristers to combat domestic violence against women. However, none of them would be able to get admission in our public universities and would have to seek admission elsewhere because of the curriculum followed by the English medium schools and colleges.

It is ironical that while they cannot get admission in our public universities, many of them would get admission in some of the best universities in the US and the UK with scholarship. Isn't it time we recognised their merit and did everything to remove the barriers to their entry in public universities?

We suggest that the anomalous situation created by three different streams of education, particularly insofar as admission to public universities is concerned, should be rectified. While much has been done to address the problem of admission of Madrasa students in public universities, no such arrangement has been made for students of the English medium institutions.

The English medium schools have been functioning largely without much support from the government so far. These schools and their students deserve better.

## Cybercriminals operating with impunity

Bangladesh worst affected

**T**HE recent siphoning off of US\$101 million from Bangladesh Bank (BB) by international cyber criminals has brought to the limelight the security unpreparedness of Bangladeshi institutions and end users alike. As per a Reuters report, we understand that a criminal gang of international cyber hackers have stolen about \$1 billion from 100 financial institutions over the last two years. While financial institutions such as BB has the resources to combat these attacks, we are left to wonder how end users in Bangladesh, where about 22 percent of mobile users have faced one form of malware attack or another over the last one year - which according to Kaspersky data is the highest in the world - are going to protect themselves.

Looking beyond internet-enabled mobile usage in the country, we also find an increasing tendency of such criminals to attempt to infect computers to steal money via online access to banks. While the bulk of users in the country use one form of anti-virus software on their computers, the fact is that a large percentage of consumers now use their smart phones for their computing needs. There is a greater need also to educate the public about the "dos and don'ts" of internet usage. End users or customers do need and should be getting the security they deserve for online transactions from the service providers themselves, in this case, financial institutions. We hope authorities will prioritise drafting policies that will make it mandatory for financial institutions to initiate end-to-end secure and encrypted communication to safeguard clients' information that will foil future malware attacks.

## Condemnable murder of a priest

*Bangladesh Development Initiative (BDI)* strongly condemns the murder of Jogeswar Dasadhikari, the priest at the temple in Shonapota, Debiganj, in Panchagarh, and attacks on devotees at the temple. Our hearts go out to the family of the priest and the other victims, the Hindu community, and people in the area, as we stand in solidarity with them.

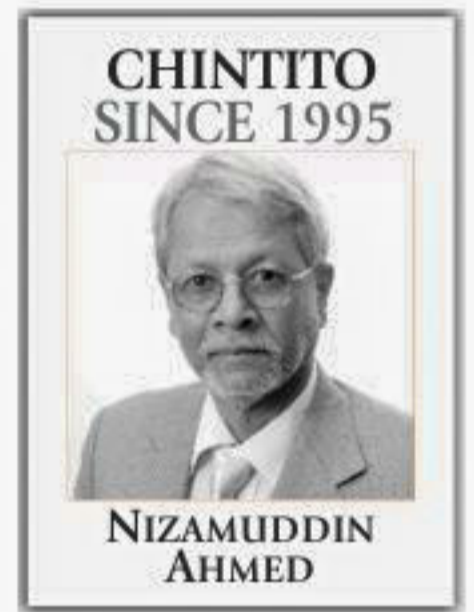
There are no words sufficient to condemn this atrocity. No murder is acceptable in a civilised society and this one appears particularly heinous since, according to news reports, the priest was arranging his offerings for the morning puja when the killers lured him out and struck. We urge the authorities to conduct a thorough and speedy investigation to bring the criminals to justice. We also note that there have been several other attacks on members of other faith traditions within the country. This includes attacks on the places of worship of Shias, Ahmadiyyas and the Buddhists.

We urge all segments of the Bangladeshi society, leaders and members of all faiths and creeds, to raise their voices strongly against these atrocities. Bangladesh's majority community has a special responsibility to condemn such actions and help preserve the rights of the country's minority segments. Bangladesh was founded on the idea of secularism and religious tolerance, which holds that everyone should be allowed to practice their religion in peace and harmony. While some quarters are in denial regarding the rise of extremism in the country, recent attacks on religious minorities, bloggers/publishers, and foreigners, have already tarnished the country's good name.

However, the principle at stake is greater than merely a country's image, and the national compact. Such incidents violate a basic premise of human civilisation, namely, the right of all people to life and liberty.

BDI, a non-partisan and non-profit research and advocacy group based in the US promoting socio-economic development of Bangladesh.

# This is not cricket. Or, is it?



NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

**CHINTITO SINCE 1995**  
**T**HE smiles say it all, not on our faces. The desire of the Indians to beat us (in cricket), their eagerness to prove a point after losing the last ODI series, and that their arch

rivals Pakistan had upped us by only two runs in the previous Asia Cup final 2012, were reasons they could not hide even behind the giant placard that read 'Champion'.

As two national teams fight it out in the middle, opposing fans are caught in the frenzy of the rivalry. The bloodless confrontation continues long after the winning teamsters have uprooted the stumps, not without a battle cry, the sweat on their faces the war paint.

Notwithstanding the fact that Bangladesh trails India significantly in head-to-head encounters, which some would attribute to India's longer time on the crease of international cricket, but fuelled by the ascending form of the Tigers that led to a recent ODI series defeat of the neighbours and the acerbic 'mauka mauka' campaign, the rivalry (at least among the fans) has never been stronger. While this competition is generally positive for the game and the people of both countries, the stance of some overzealous followers of both the teams, particularly on the social media, would be no-balled by any umpire.

The game of cricket had perhaps lost its stamp of gentlemanliness in the late 1970's when Australian media tycoon, and an egotistical sports enthusiast, Kerry Francis Bullmore Packer confronted the cricket moguls of the ICC, England and Australia over television rights of the Ashes. He poured millions for hitherto underpaid cricketers to feature in 'his' World Series Cricket on transformed football pitches, and that too under light, and donning motorcycle helmets. Many of you will recognise him as Kerry Packer. For better or for worse, he changed the game for good.

In the game of cricket, bowlers will release the cherry, fast and slow, with straightened arm like Taskin Ahmed or bent like Jasprit Singh Bumrah. The ICC as well as the Indian buffs obviously has



PHOTO: STAR

a different pair of eyes. At the other end, batsmen will clobber some deliveries to the rope, over or along the green carpet. Fielders, apparently the third factor in the circle, can make a big difference by restricting running between the wickets, or by holding or dropping what had come off the bat.

Despite such straight-cut divisions, silly as it may sound, even the greatest executors in the game will hint punditry by advocating that all the three departments must work out for a team to register victory. That's obvious, isn't it? Everyone, and anyone who knows a bat from a ball, knows that. And that brings us to literally the fourth branch in today's cricket - the decked up, heckling, and fanatical fans, without which cricket would have died in the latter part of the last century, and in whites too. No wonder Kerry and all those players, who had furtively signed above the dotted line for pay-checks that were more than their entire career's earnings, are looked up as saviours. RIP too, Tony Greig.

The media feud between some Bangladesh and Indian cricket fans has reached a point of indecency, and cannot be justified as being part of any sport: Name calling, taking matters to a personal level, bringing in socio-

economic-political issues that are totally unrelated to the game, giving rise to suspicion that the perpetrators have more than one axe to grind.

Of course, news headlines such as "Taskin Ahmed and Arafat Sunny of Bangladesh have been reported for suspect action by ICC, during the ongoing T20 World Cup 2016 in India", do not help mend fractures. That bizarre allegation by ICC officials, meaning umpires, during a crucial part of a tournament and so soon after Bangladesh were beaten by India in the Asia Cup final, brought out the previously unseen fervent and fiery side of Bangladesh's Sri Lankan Coach Chandika Hathurasingha. He was livid, and was quoted by ESPN Cricinfo: "If they have a concern about my bowlers, I have a concern about their [ICC's] actions as well. I don't see anything wrong. They have bowled the same way as the last twelve months."

Bangladesh fans were visibly enraged and were quick to compare Indian medium-fast bowler Bumrah's greatly bent right arm with that of Taskin's straight action. Some were of the opinion that India's fiscal domination of the global sport was the fuel in the fire.

Others heaved a sigh of mocking relief, verbalised as 'Thank God, the Indians do not play football,' under a photo of Barcelona heroes, but caught forlorn on camera, Neymar Jr. and Lionel Messi. Such arguments are in line with sporting opinions.

Both sides, however have crossed, the lines on several occasions. For example, Taskin was photoshopped carrying Indian skipper M. S. Dhoni's head by the hair before the Asia Cup T20 final. The pungent pun boomeranged after our docile defeat to India, and then, again in bad taste, Indian supporters put up Dhoni carrying a beheaded Bangladeshi cricketer. And now Taskin's action?

With so much money, publicity and fame related to the game, it will be near impossible to take it back to the leisurely pastime about which Neville Cardus wrote between 1919 and before his death in 1975. Uncannily, Kerry Packer's World Series was played from 1977-79. But, good sense from all concerned can let us sit back and again enjoy the game for what it is.

The writer is a practising Architect at BashaBari Ltd., a Commonwealth Scholar and a Fellow, a Baden-Powell Fellow Scout Leader, and a Major Donor Rotarian.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Image damaging statements

The Supreme Court issued a contempt of court rule against the Food Minister and the Liberation War Affairs Minister for their bitter criticism of Chief Justice in relation to the hearing of an appeal of war crimes convict Mir Quasem Ali. They have been summoned by the court. The ruling party people should be more careful about making any statement because it may damage the government's image.  
**An Independent Observer**  
 Dhaka

### Anti-FMD vaccine for cattle

Recently, the veterinary scientists of Bangladesh Livestock Research Institute (BLRI) have invented a preventive vaccine for cattle's foot and mouth disease (FMD), a major viral ailment which causes the country an estimated loss of 100 billion taka annually. This locally produced vaccine would save the

country a huge amount of foreign currency that would be required to import vaccine from foreign countries. I congratulate the scientists for this medical breakthrough. The government needs to encourage such inventions.  
**Md Ashraf Hossain**  
 Dhaka

