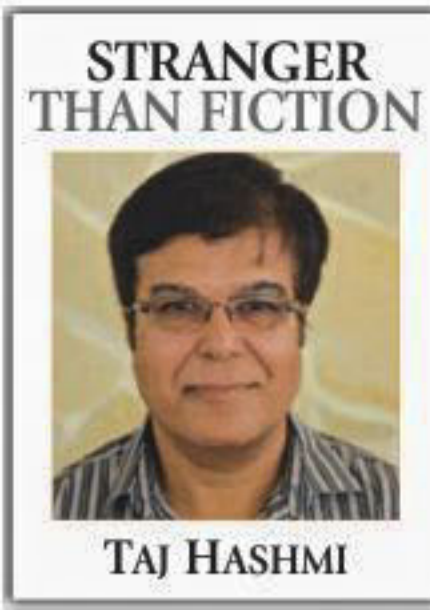


# Why was Muhammad Ali Greater than his legend?



**STRANGER THAN FICTION**  
Taj Hashmi

**L**AST Friday (June 10), the "Great" Muhammad Ali was laid to rest at his birthplace, Louisville Kentucky. Around 15,000 people attended his funeral. While Obama sent a message, eulogising him as "A man who fought for us", former president Clinton attended the funeral and considered Ali a great American, a citizen of the world, and "greater than his legend". Hundreds of celebrities, - holding diverse faiths and political ideologies - attended the funeral, from Jesse Jackson to Yusuf Islam, David Beckham to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and Hamid Karzai to Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Ali wasn't legendary because of boxing. He wasn't the greatest boxer of all time, either. This honour goes to Joe Louis (1914-1981), who remained the World Heavyweight Champion for the longest period, for twelve years between 1937 and 1949. In 2005, the International Boxing Research Organization ranked Louis - not Ali - as the #1 heavyweight of all-time.

Yet the whole world was crazy about him. Even before he became the World Heavyweight Champion - the light heavyweight boxing champion from the Rome Olympics (1960) - media in America and elsewhere projected this young black man as the next world champion. I recall reading about his historic fight with World Champion Sonny Liston - as a high school student - in local newspapers in Bangladesh in 1964.

The "Ali Phenomenon" or what made Muhammad Ali CNN's "most famous face in the world" is enigmatic. People, who don't understand and like boxing admire him most; and consider him to be the "Greatest" champion of human rights, human dignity, and world peace. His self-promotion as the "Greatest", which he did before and after his becoming the World Champion, has nothing to do with it. On February 24, 1964, he defeated his more formidable rival Sonny Liston, converted to Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali.

He came on *Time* magazine's cover page five times in total. Interestingly, the first time was in February 1963, one year before he became the World Champion; the second time, days after he lost his title to Leon Spinks in February 1978; and (possibly) the last time, after his death in June 2016. Had something not been that special about him, the *Time*, *Life*, *Sports Illustrated*, *GQ* and

hundreds of newspapers, TV channels, and magazines across the world wouldn't have given such wide coverage to what Ali was all about, during the peak of his boxing career, after his retirement from boxing in 1981, and after his death. While *Time* even put him on its cover after he had lost his title, in 1999, the British public agreed by naming him BBC Sports Personality of the Century, and the *GQ* Magazine declared him as the "Athlete of the Century".

The following is an excerpt from *Time's* first cover story on the 21-year-old boxer, "I'm

a persistent symbol of courage, defiance, integrity, and loud protests against injustice. His first public protest against segregation in America was symbolic. As he writes in his autobiography, shortly after his return from the Rome Olympics in 1960, he threw away his gold medal into the Ohio River after a white waitress had refused to serve him at a "Whites Only" restaurant at Louisville, his hometown.

Ali epitomised what one single brave and bold individual, with honesty and integrity, could do to unnerve the vested interest

stripped him of his world boxing title and passport for almost four years (1967-1971) for his refusal to fight an unjust war against the Vietnamese people. He refused to fight the Viet Cong who never harmed him, or called him a "nigger", and asked: "Why should they ask me to ... go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?"

His defiance of the mighty US government lionised him. The good looking, humorous,

Henceforth, the "Ali Phenomenon" has been working like sunshine and oxygen, keeping people's hope and aspirations alive, within and beyond America. His defiance of white supremacist ideology, and the West's hegemonic designs in the Third World emboldened people in Cuba and Cambodia, South Africa, Vietnam and Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Palestine, Philippines and everywhere.

He was the butterfly people loved and admired; he was the power, power-drunk bullies feared most. No wonder, both Democrats and Republicans honoured him with medals of freedom. No wonder Ali wasn't the "house negro". No kowder, within days after his death, the New York City administration renamed Manhattan Street as Muhammad Ali Way. His influence is so overpowering that even those who hate him and his ideas most - viz. Donald Trump and his racist supporters - don't dare to denigrate him publicly.

Underdogs in the world are so familiar with his name, face, and the causes he championed that it's no exaggeration his influence was much more profound and long-lasting than that of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. represented collectively. Unlike some of the great men of the 20th and 21st centuries, he never went to college - though he became a commencement speaker at Harvard in 1975 - and was not engaged in politics in the conventional sense of the expression. He was engaged in a violent sport for 25 years, but hated unnecessary violence, and killings of innocent human beings in unnecessary, unjust wars.

While the average Americans have strong reservations about Islam and Muslims after 9/11, they love and admire Muhammad Ali, who was not only a proud and practicing Muslim, but also a great lover of humanity, irrespective of people's race and belief systems. In his own words:

"We all have the same God, we just serve him differently. Rivers, lakes, ponds, streams, oceans all have water. So do religions have different names, and they all contain truth, expressed in different ways, forms, and times. It doesn't matter whether you're a Muslim, a Christian, or a Jew. When you believe in God, you should believe that all people are part of one family. If you love God, you can't love only some of his children."

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Saying goodbye to the Greatest.

PHOTO: REUTERS

the Greatest" in 1963: "Some people think Cassius Clay talks too much. But Cassius just laughs, and keeps on talking. Sometimes he talks in doggerel: 'This is the story about a man, With iron fists and a beautiful tan, He talks a lot and boasts indeed, Of a powerful punch and blinding speed'. Sometimes he stunts to prose. 'I'm beee-ootiful,' he croons. 'I'm the greatest. I'm the double greatest'..." His greatness, however, transcended the boxing ring.

He was the greatest because he emerged as

groups, and mobilise mass support for civil rights in America, and for justice and world peace. Ali was - in a way - instrumental in the election of Barack Obama as the first black president of America. It wouldn't be far-fetched to attribute the growing support among young Americans for Bernie Sanders' movement against the Wall Street and the Military-Industrial Complex to Ali's fight for justice.

He fought the US Administration, which

talkative and witty young boxer - that he was in the 1960s - became popular overnight, across the world. And finally, he won. The Supreme Court overturned his conviction. He made Blacks, Muslims, and underdogs everywhere proud of their heritage, and (gradually) bold enough to challenge the unjust world order. He strengthened the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, and wholeheartedly supported the ongoing "Black Lives Matter" movement in America.

# Two questions about the Delta Plan 2100

**NAZRUL ISLAM**

**B**ANGLADESH is moving ahead with a project to formulate the Delta Plan 2100. Apparently, this is a good idea. After all, Bangladesh is primarily a delta, and a long term plan for its land and water use may well be called "Delta Plan 2100" to emphasise its long term nature.

However, there are many questions about the way this plan is being formulated. Two important questions: after forty-five years of independence and sixty years of water development experience why does

to both. Foreign consultants who dominated the Krug commission and IEC were mostly from countries in which deltas are not that important (such as in the United States), so that they did not quite understand the reality of a delta.

The ill effects of the Cordon approach are now everywhere to see. It has led to promotion of below-flood-level settlement, aggradation of river bed, subsidence of flood and tidal plains, deterioration of the water bodies inside the floodplains, disruption of open

The annual volume of the Rhine flow (75 cubic kilometre) is only 7.2 percent of the combined flow of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra (1032 cubic kilometre). If the Meghna flow is included, this ratio will likely be less than five percent. Thus, there is no comparison between the volumes of flows of the rivers of these two deltas.

Second, there is a striking difference in the seasonality of the river flows in the two deltas. The figure below shows that most of the "rainfall" in Bangladesh is concentrated in the four months (June-September). By contrast, the rainfall in the Netherlands is almost evenly distributed across the all months of the year. The difference in seasonality in "river flows" will be greater than in rainfall, because the rivers carry not only the rainfall within Bangladesh but also of the entire catchment area of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna Rivers, 92.6 percent of which lies outside Bangladesh.

As a result of the low volume and absence of seasonality, the Dutch could resort to the Cordon approach to their rivers. That is why, during the FAP debate in the wake of the 1988 flood, the Dutch experts supported the dangerous French proposal of double-embanking all major rivers of Bangladesh. Clearly, the Dutch are yet to understand that what is needed in Bangladesh is the "Open approach" to rivers that preserves, extends, and makes the best use of the organic

connection between the river channels and floodplains. In parentheses, it may be noted that the Dutch are realising belatedly the shortcomings of the Cordon approach and the benefits of the Open approach. They have recently taken up, what is popularly known as the "Room for Rivers" project, under which parts of floodplain are now opened up for river overflows.

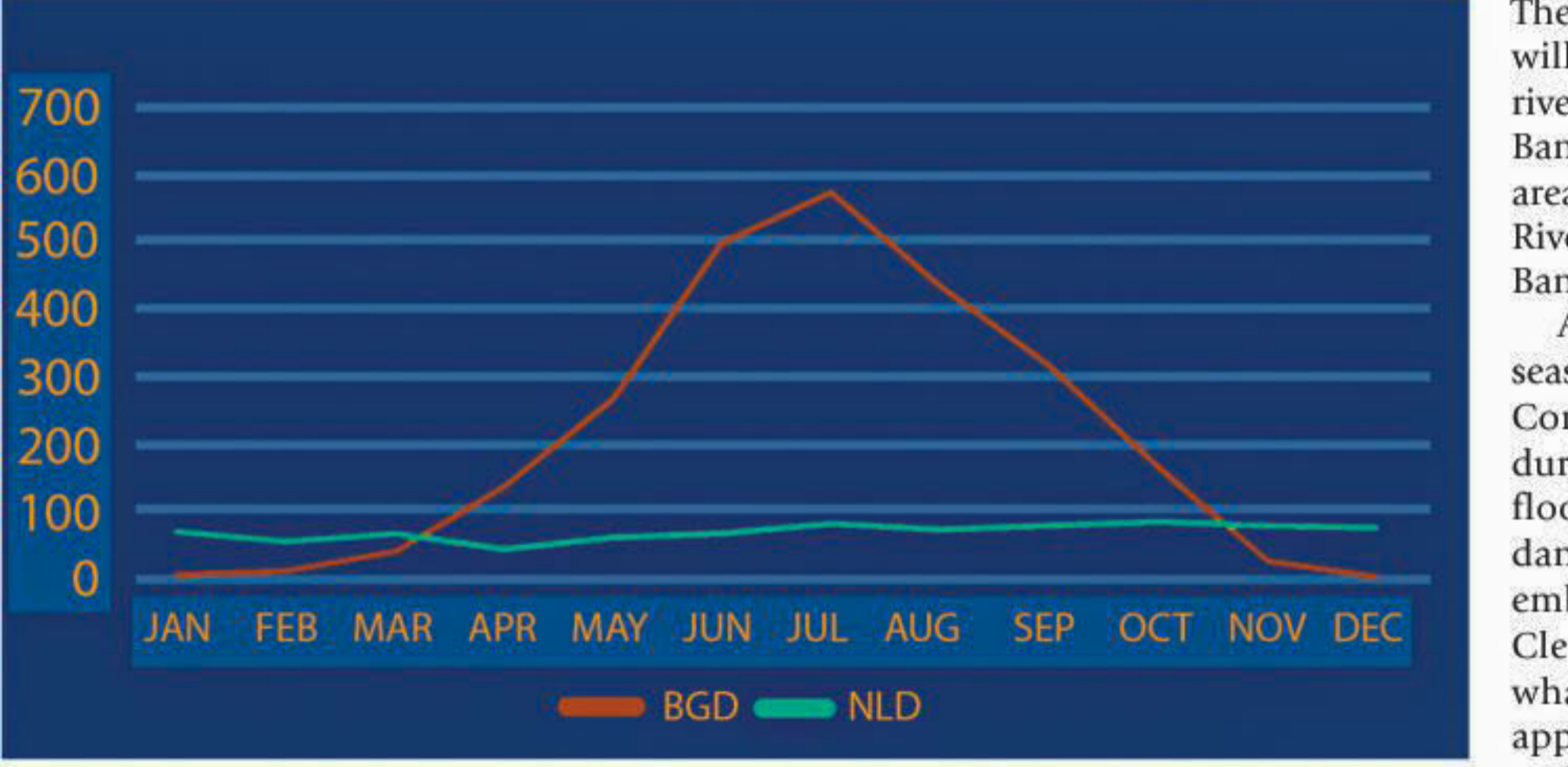
Apart from water volume and seasonality, another important difference between the Rhine delta and Bengal delta is in the amount of sediment. Partly because the Himalayas are a younger mountain range than the Alps, the rivers bring to Bangladesh about 1.5 to 2.0 billion tonnes of sediment annually. By comparison, the annual amount of sediment brought down by the Rhine is 2.7 million tonnes only (less than a day's amount in Bangladesh). There is therefore no vigorous land accretion process in the Rhine delta. Hence, the Dutch had to resort to reclamation of land from *under the sea level*, so that now about 28 percent of the area of the Netherlands is below the sea-level, containing about one-fifth of the population. The danger of this situation is getting worse with the rising sea level caused by global warming. By contrast, vigorous delta formation has led to net accretion of 1,882 hectares of land annually between 1973 and 2000 in Bangladesh. Thus Bangladesh does not need to replicate the

Dutch experience of reclamation of land from under the sea-level. Bangladesh is fortunate to have natural extension of land *above the sea level*.

In view of the above, it is hardly reassuring that the current Delta Plan is being prepared under the Dutch guidance. Moreover, the recent Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by Bangladesh, the Dutch and the World Bank suggest that the whole project is again likely to be dominated by a similar cast of experts as was the case with the Krug commission and IEC Master Plan.

The Bangladesh Delta Plan should be prepared under Bangladesh finance and leadership of Bangladeshi experts. If Bangladesh can finance Padma Bridge from its own resources, it can very well find the relatively small amount necessary to prepare the Delta Plan. Also, Bangladesh now has enough national expertise to analyse closely its vast experience of water development and formulate a delta plan that conforms to the indigenous intricacies of land, water, people, history, and culture. More importantly, formulation of the delta plan should not be viewed as the task of a closed group of "experts". It has to be a process of open public dialogue, in which the common people can participate on an equal footing with others.

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Bangladesh need a delta plan formulation process that is heavily dependent on foreign advice and financing? Second, is the Dutch experience most relevant for formulation of the delta plan for Bangladesh? We consider below these two questions very briefly.

With respect to the first question, it may be noted that Bangladesh already has the disappointing experience of foreign-led water development strategy. In the fifties, a commission led by Mr. Krug of US Army Corps of Engineers was invited to Bangladesh to advice on its water development strategy. Following that commission's report, in the early sixties the International Engineering Co. (IEC) prepared a master plan, containing a list of twenty-seven projects. The water development efforts of the country for the next six decades have basically been directed toward implementation of the projects of that master plan. The basic philosophy behind the Krug Commission's report and the Master Plan has been the "Cordon Approach" to rivers, according to which the floodplains and tidal plains are to be cordoned off from surrounding rivers by constructing uninterrupted embankments. This philosophy ignores the fundamental fact that in a delta the floodplains (also the tidal plains) are organically connected with the river channels, so that these two cannot be separated without causing harm

capture fisheries, diminution of waterways, reduced recharge of groundwater table, and most importantly ubiquitous waterlogging. The Dhaka-Narayanganj-Demra (DND) project - the showcase of the Cordon approach - provides an example of these effects. Meanwhile, the promised surface water irrigation potential of the Cordon projects generally failed to materialize, and expansion of irrigation was almost completely taken over by tube-well irrigation, for which Cordons were mostly unnecessary, if not a hindrance. (For details, see the author's book *Let the Delta Be a Delta!*)

Given this sorry experience why again turn to foreign assistance for formulating the delta plan of Bangladesh? It may be said that while the Krug Commission and the Master Plan were dominated by experts who had less knowledge about deltas, the current Delta Plan is formulated with technical assistance and financing of the Dutch, who have better knowledge of delta, because their country - the Netherlands - is also primarily a delta formed by the Rhine River and its distributaries. This brings us to the second question above, namely how appropriate is the Dutch experience for Bangladesh's delta plan? Unfortunately, the answer to this question is: "not much." This is because of the following.

Not all deltas are the same, and the conditions of the Rhine delta are entirely different from those of Bangladesh delta.

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