

# A fresh look at Delhi-Dhaka ties

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

**A**VIJIT Mukherjee, son of Indian President Pranab Mukherjee and Lok Sabha MP, recently on a private visit to Dhaka, has left a good impression by his clarity of

thought on a rather tangled issue. He said, the attacks on minorities in Bangladesh were not taking place on religious grounds! If it were, he argued, the majority community would have been spared the onslaught; but clearly it is not. As you may have noticed with trepidation that the list of victims is already long enough to evoke growing unease. No point comparing with the horror of mass killing enacted elsewhere to derive a false consolation from!

Once an oasis of religious and communal harmony, Bangladesh hogs news lines today for the wrong reasons along with basking in the sunshine of its resilient growth profile. This contradiction cannot tarnish its upscale image in economy and development based on incremental value additions by its enterprising people. The country has an inherent strength in her homogeneity to bounce back in the near future. That hope springs eternally in our heart.

and extremism have no place whatsoever in Islam. On the subject of the call by Alems, to fight terrorism, the details read exhaustive and thoroughgoing enough underpinned by an elaborate operational strategy, it seems. Led by Fariduddin Masud, the grand imam of Sholakia mosque and chairman of Jamatul Ulema, the documentation has 30 parts, 26 covering divisional headquarters and 4 for women Alems. The principal call bears the stamp of Darul Ullm Deobandh, Mainul Islam Hathazari Madrasa, Islamic Research Centre, Charmonai Jamia Rashidia Islamia, Shaikh Zakaria Research Centre and Jamatul Asad Madrasa. Hefazate Islam leaders have endorsed the call.

Masud emphatically stated that those who commit terrorism in the name of religion do so prompted by the dream of going to heaven. But when they will come to realise that they are taking the path to hell and not to heaven, they will refrain from treading it. Although complete elimination would be elusive, the cleric hoped for a substantial lessening of the scourge if the call was implemented.

As if chiming in with the initiative, 14-party alliance leaders through a human chain directed MPs and local leaders to instill a message of resistance in the public

mind. Clearly, community involvement spearheaded by a collective political will underpinned by civil society support could do wonders in freezing the subversive elements on their tracks. The attention span naturally rivets on to the bilateral issues. On the Teesta question Sushma Swaraj stressed that India-Bangladesh and West Bengal government will have to be on the same page to script an accord. Now that Mamata has got a second term with a stronger mandate her hands, to that extent, are strengthened to translate her original commitment to Bangladesh into a reality on the ground. This is a litmus test for Indo-Bangladesh relations going forward.

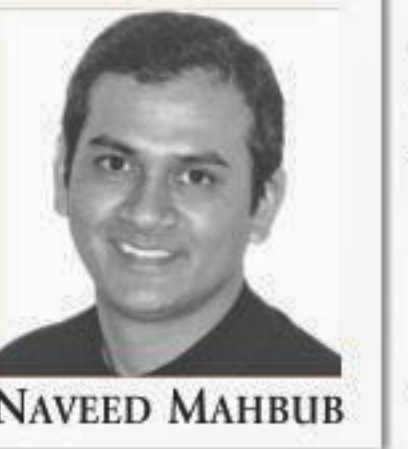
Avijit struck a responsive chord in many Bangladeshi hearts when he voiced urgency for simplifying visa procedures currently hemmed in by complications, intermittent efforts to the contrary. Emphasising the need for people-to-people contacts for better understanding, there appears to be no alternative to pushing the envelope, as it were.

A word about 'zero tolerance' of border killings that we feel strongly about: a border of peace should be an ideal realised between two mature countries.

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## Who Moved My Cheese?

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

**T**HE road side crepe in Paris looks delicious. I ask my mandatory question to the vendor who looks like he will understand my question, "Is the chicken *halal*?" "No." "Then can I have a cheese and egg crepe?" "The egg is *halal*, but the cheese isn't."

While I am perplexed at what constitutes a *halal* egg or cheese, here are two men, one from France and one from Bangladesh, standing there on the brink of a major tactical, er, tactical decision bound to influence the French economy by 3 Euros - cheese-it or Brexit.

I go for the cheese and egg crepe. To the best of my knowledge, there is no such thing as a non-halal cheese, let alone a non-*halal* egg.

Mmmm! A piece of Dhaka in Paris as I bite into what is the closest I can get to the comfort food of Bangladesh craved by this weary traveler - the beloved omelet, fried *poneer* (cottage cheese) and burnt red chili with rice.

I therefore find it amusing that master chef Nadiya Hussain of *The Great British Bake Off* fame says on *The Guardian*, "My mother [of Bangladesh] never bought any [cheese] because there was none in Bangladeshi cuisine."

I guess the screaming street vendor or the door-to-door salesmen (from the pre-apartment days) screaming "Ei, *poneeer*, *poneeer*!" doesn't 'sound' quite as classy as the feta or cheddar or mozzarella cheese and surely something not to be nibbled at during 'hobnobbing with the right people' to win a Nobel prize.

But when she adds that "the concept of dessert doesn't exist in Bangladeshi cuisine", all hell breaks loose on social media, perhaps more so due to the Ramadan invoked lack of otherwise overloaded sugar in the blood streams of the local boys and girls in Bangladesh.

No dessert in Bangladeshi culture? I thought even the religiously non-inclined all of a sudden gets very pious about observing the *Sunnat* after a meal - gotta have something sweet. No dessert after a square meal, and we have a mob of sugar starved Incredible Hulks, "Don't make me hungry [for dessert], you won't like me when I'm hungry!"

And you want to know about my household growing up? No dessert? No problem. Dad takes a tea spoon (table spoon if outside the peripheral vision of mom) of raw sugar, so what if there are ants running around in the sugar pot. And us kids? We would suck at the makeshift hole of the Blue Cross condensed milk can just like a hungry calf does with the udders of its nonchalant mommy cow. Ah! Blue Cross, our sugar laden gastronomic Red Cross.

Even the Taka 11 a month school lunches provided by my pre-SSC government school fetched us a gratifying *kalo jaam*, *bhundia* or *jilapi* after a paratha meal. And I'm not talking about this during the era of Shaista Khan, but a mere 2 decades ago. Even the government knows where to apply major subsidies wisely to keep the adolescent hormones calm.

Still not convinced that we are a dessert craving people? Just go out on the streets of Bangladesh now - *jilapis* are selling like hot cakes. Nah, that's too 'cheesy' a 'sugar' coated Anglicized term. It's *jilapi*, selling like hot *piajus*. Ah! I salivate.

But, heartiest congratulations in order to Nadiya for being the one to bake Queen Elizabeth II her 90th birthday cake. You make us proud, though we had nothing to do with your success other than that your ancestors at some point moved from Sylhet to UK. But that's our habit, we will boast of you as being one of us even if you don't know us or our cuisine. We will buck you up as you reach higher and higher grounds. We continue to be your ardent cheer leaders, albeit not hot looking, well shaped ones jumping with colorful pom-pom, but rather, colourful ones holding well shaped and hot *jilapis* and *poneer*. And I assure you, we will not be jumping, but sitting, thanks to a stuffed tummy. Oh, and that's sitting on chairs, as did our fathers and their fathers and their fathers. Hope that addresses the other thing you said on *The Guardian*: "There were no chairs in Bangladesh..." unless you meant from the time around when the wheel was just invented.

Here's an idea for the next potential winner of *The Great British Bake Off* - a really sugary cheese cake in the shape of a chair...

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# THE TUNISIAN MODEL Islamists and secularists adjust to work together

RUBY AMATULLA

**I**T is encouraging to watch how Rachid Ghannouchi and Nahdha, the largest and most popular Islamic political party in Tunisia which is now widely expected to come to power again in the next election, have been transforming over time. Recently Ghannouchi astonished the world by declaring that "We will exit political Islam", meaning that the country would be working to separate religious work from politics. Coming from one who once advocated Sharia law in governance, this change is amazing. Ghannouchi's leadership of remaining flexible, without compromising fundamental values and principles of Islam, has played a major role in helping Tunisia to become a vibrant democracy today, when other countries in the region have failed.

While Nahdha was in power, two opposition leaders were assassinated in 2013 and there were mass protests. To restore trust and confidence among people, Nahdha resigned and handed over power to a neutral caretaker government, who would be in charge until the next election. A secular party, Nidaa Tounes, got the majority in the Parliament in the subsequent election held in October 2014. Nahdha readily conceded defeat and pledged its cooperation. Thus a dignified political tradition, complying with the democratic spirit, was initiated. People's trust was restored. Even the parties who lost in the last two elections in Tunisia confirm that elections were fair and the system is working well.

Going back, in June 2003, representatives of three major secular political parties made a visionary and courageous move in meeting representatives of Nahdha, then in exile, to negotiate and sign a joint declaration: "Call from Tunis" (issued from Paris). That document laid down rules of future political engagements that would ensure upholding democratic principles as well as respecting religious traditions and guaranteeing religious freedom. Since then, constructive engagements and protracted negotiations for a decade or so have produced a progressive Constitution, including terms of gender parity, proportional representation (PR) electoral system, and so on; a political system that should be emulated by the rest of the Muslim world.

This is an enormous achievement for a previously divided society that was ruled by autocrats since its independence from France in 1956, and torn between modernity and religious traditions. Since the Jasmine Revolution that ended President Ben Ali's 23-year autocratic rule in January 2011, the nation has gone through difficulties but has survived with amazing resilience. The main contributing factor is the constructive engagement of the oppositions and the consequent changes in the greater society creating optimism and public trust in the political processes.

Right after the revolution, Nahdha was very popular and was widely expected to win about 90 percent seats in the Constituent Assembly without the PR [proportional representation] system. That would be unacceptable to the secular and liberal parties. To avoid turmoil in the country, Nahdha accepted PR whereby, they knew, the party's share of the Assembly would drastically shrink.

In fact in the October 2011 elections, after using the PR system, Nahdha got only 41 percent seats. In spite of being the largest party in the Assembly, Nahdha formed coalition



The goals of the revolution in Tunisia have not yet been achieved but the country is seeing some progress. PHOTO: AFP

and shared power with the two secular groups. Paradoxically, the constraints and compromises of power-sharing among the oppositions have been the key to Tunisia's success in having a functional democracy today.

On the other hand, Egypt, a regional power, could not hang on to the emancipation process after ending the long repressive rule of Hosni Mubarak around the same time of Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution in January 2011. Only two-and-a-half years after the Revolution, and one year after Mohamed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was elected president, a military coup removed Morsi from power on July 3, 2013. Again a military man, the former Defence Minister, Abdel Fateh al-Sisi, who led the last coup, is on the throne, claiming to have received over 90 percent votes in the last election. Egypt is back full circle.

The main reason Egypt was unsuccessful is because secularists and Islamic groups failed to reach out to each other. President Morsi, after assuming power, refused to listen to the secular voices in the country, took an uncompromising approach, tried to consolidate power fast, and sent a signal of another authoritarian rule in Egypt. Massive protests erupted nationwide and turmoil ensued. The army took over power. The nation, since its independence from Britain in 1922, lost a historic opportunity for self-rule. The Islamic party bears a lion's share of the blame for this failure. However, looking back, secular forces also remain responsible for this unfortunate outcome. Moderate Islamists have been persecuted at the hands of autocratic secular rulers going back to Nasser's time over 60 years ago, while secular groups and civil society gave lip service to pluralism but remained silent when moderate Islamists were oppressed and their rights were violated.

Many western and eastern scholars have been repeatedly pointing out that whenever constructive moves of moderate Islamist groups are ignored and they are persecuted, extreme radical forces emerge. Ghannouchi confirms: Salafist and Jihadist groups

emerged both in Tunisia and Egypt during the repressive secular rules.

As radicalism intensifies, autocratic regimes find more excuses to continue their grip in the name of fighting terrorism. In reality, they imprison opposition leaders at will and violate the civil rights of citizens. The western powers, in the name of stability, support and do business with these undemocratic ruthless regimes. Their support reinforces the status quo and their hypocrisy creates cynicism and distrust among the people under such a repressive rule. The anger and frustration of some segments of the society, especially of the younger generation, help reinforce radicalism. Radicals find more justifications for their vicious work. That also increases the ferocity of repression.

This vicious cycle continues with the reckless way of pursuing de-radicalisation. The recent events in many countries is a testament to the fact that the 'War on Terror' policy has failed, in spite of spending hundreds of billions of dollars by the powerful western countries. There is no military solution to radicalism, especially in this global society with an ever higher intolerance for subjugation and humiliation, and with the ever more availability of arms through reckless arms businesses. It is long overdue that the world powers focus on a deep rooted agenda to address radicalism, such as helping establish power-sharing democratic rule. The counterproductive strategy of pursuing stability at the expense of democracy ultimately helps create a stagnant situation devoid of both stability and democracy.

Tunisia seems to be getting out of this quagmire. Radicals have either mostly been transformed or marginalised. Both Islamists and secularists are finding common grounds and democracy is thriving in the country.

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## QUOTABLE Quote



ROSA GUY

Trinidadian-born US novelist, playwright, and children's writer

Change is the one constant in life.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Mexican peninsula
  - 5 Prepares for war
  - 9 Rework
  - 11 Flags down
  - 13 Bolivian city
  - 14 Game leader
  - 15 Moose's kin
  - 16 Sheepish
  - 18 Mixed
  - 20 Mendes of movies
  - 21 Korean city
  - 22 Secluded spot
  - 23 Keystone character
  - 24 Hair goo
  - 25 Abound
  - 27 Sahara sights
  - 29 Ornate planter
  - 30 Some shooters
  - 32 Corporals and privates
  - 34 Smidgen
  - 35 Consummate
  - 36 Stay way from
  - 38 Grassy plant
  - 39 Oven feature
- DOWN**
- 40 Salon jobs
  - 41 Bring home
  - 1 Army sites
  - 2 Full-price payers
  - 3 First lady in the 1960s
  - 4 Spr. mo.
  - 5 In the future
  - 6 Los Angeles team
  - 7 First lady in the 2010s
  - 8 Jacket part
  - 10 Shred
  - 12 Lot choice
  - 17 - canto
  - 19 Brie Larson movie
  - 22 Nice guy
  - 24 Reinforcing bracket
  - 25 North African capital
  - 26 Wore away
  - 27 Poorly lit
  - 28 Fast pitch
  - 30 Magnet ends
  - 31 Exacting
  - 33 Hamster holder
  - 37 Compete

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| S | A | M | E | B | O | R | I | S |
| T | R | O | V | E | O | P | E | R |
| R | E | L | A | X | A | U | T | O |
| I | N | A | P | A | R | S | O | N |
| P | A | R | L | O | R | T | O | E |
| R | A | N | T | E | E | L | S |   |
| M | O | M | S | A | G | A |   |   |
| A | X | E | P | A | R | D | O | N |
| P | A | R | R | O | T | S | R | A |
| O | N | I | O | N | U | N | I | T |
| U | N | C | L | E | S | A | V | E |
| T | E | A | L | S | V | E | R |   |

## BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

I THOUGHT THE GENERAL WAS HAVING A MEETING ON THE CONDITION OF THE CAMP

YES, AND I WAS GOING TO SPEAK AT IT

UNTIL THE GENERAL SAW MY NOTES

## BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

DADDY I JUST SNUFFOOTED!

COME AGAIN?

I CAN SNEEZE, BURP AND TOOT AT THE SAME TIME!

I HAVE A SUPER-POWER!

SON, IF ANY OF THOSE WERE IN CRIME-FIGHTING INSTEAD OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT.