

MP's comment on NGO's freedom of speech

Contrary to the Constitution

WE are shocked at the implications of a comment by Suranjit Sengupta that NGOs do not have the right to freedom of speech and the precedence it sets. Our bafflement at the "Foreign Donations Regulation Act, 2016" continues to grow at the MP's comment. Not only is the comment unconstitutional, coming from a legislator it is baffling. Even the said Act, which the comment is related to, does not have such a draconian provision. And are we to assume that NGOs are not constituted of citizens of the country, who constitutionally enjoy the basic rights?

We have expressed our reservations to the legislation before, pointing out the lack of a proper definition of 'derogatory' comments, the wide scope of its misapplication, and the free pass this gives to democratic institutions from any form of criticism.

The law empowers the NGO Affairs Bureau to take punitive measures against foreign-funded NGOs in the name of curbing anti-state activities. While no one encourages anti-state activities, we feel obliged to point out that dissent and criticism are but part and parcel of a well-functioning democracy.

No democratic institution should be above criticism. Our Constitution safeguards these fundamental rights to voice grievances and opposing views. It is inconceivable to suggest, as the MP did, that one must be politically active to comment on affairs of the state.

The legislation threatens to curb voices of dissent. It is a threat to the accountability and transparency we expect from the constitutional bodies. The blanket denial of freedom of speech might point to graver implications in the future.

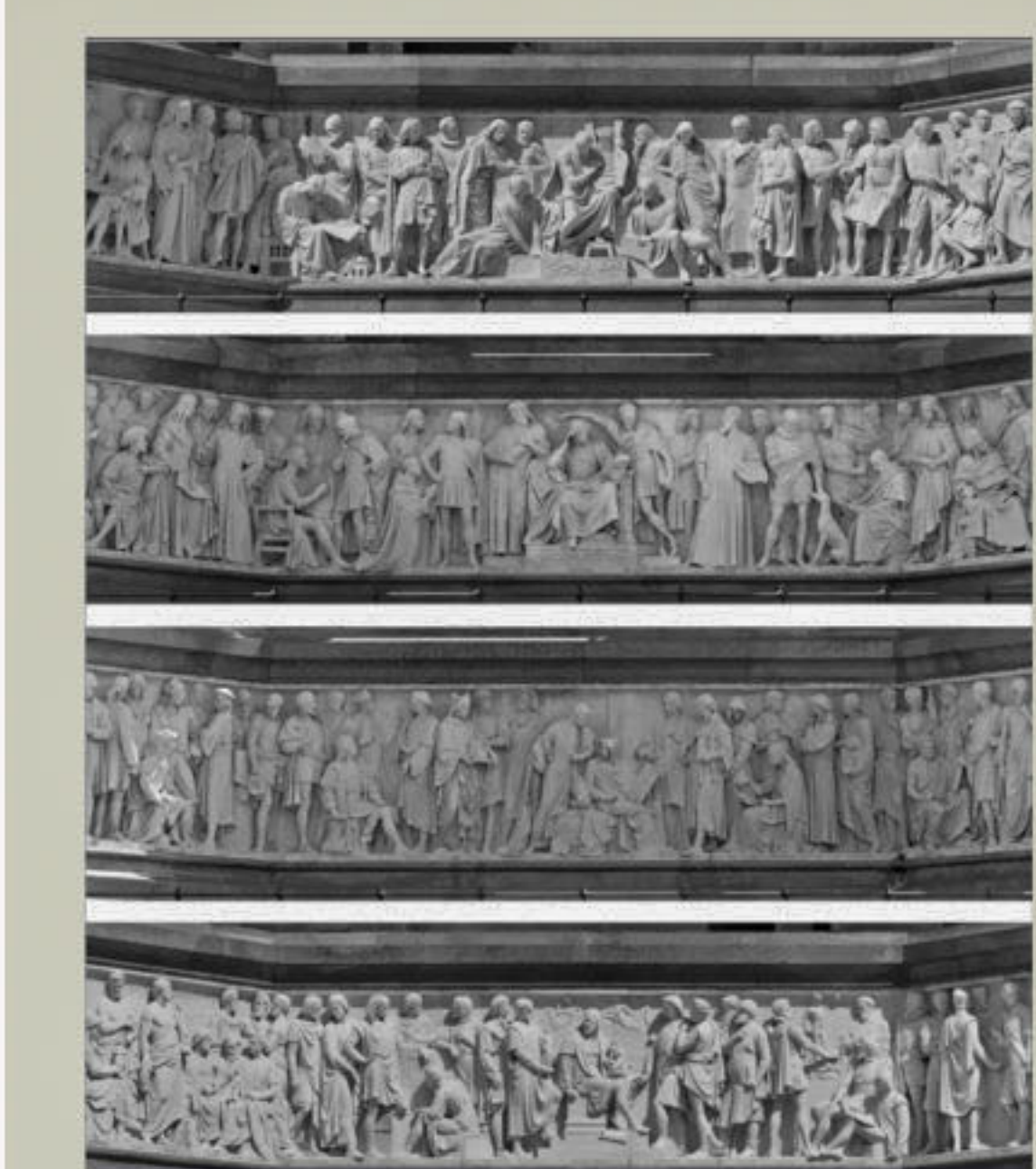
Two doctors for 500,000 people!

Callous disregard for public health

It is unthinkable that in two upazila health complexes (Amtali and Kukua) of Barisal district, there are only two doctors appointed. The general populace falling under the area of work of these two complexes is approximately 500,000 people. According to a report published in a leading Bangla daily, the number of doctors supposed to be working in these two centres is 39. It is baffling to think how a single doctor is looking after Taltoli Upazila Health Complex under Amtali, another health centre, two satellite clinics and five union satellite clinics. A similar situation exists for the doctor in charge of the other upazila health complex.

Is it any wonder that patients get the most rudimentary of treatments when they visit these health complexes? The satellite clinics have been shut since September 1 due to lack of medical staff while other clinics may have not closed down, but no treatment is possible because there is no doctor. How is it that the ministry of health does not take steps to appoint requisite doctors, especially where there is a 50-bed hospital in Amtoli? The poor and disadvantaged of the area are suffering in these upazillas, especially where there are anywhere between 250-300 people coming in the hope of getting treatment every day. The prevailing situation is unacceptable and we hope that the ministry will take steps to rectify the situation in the interests of public health of the area.

A WORD A DAY



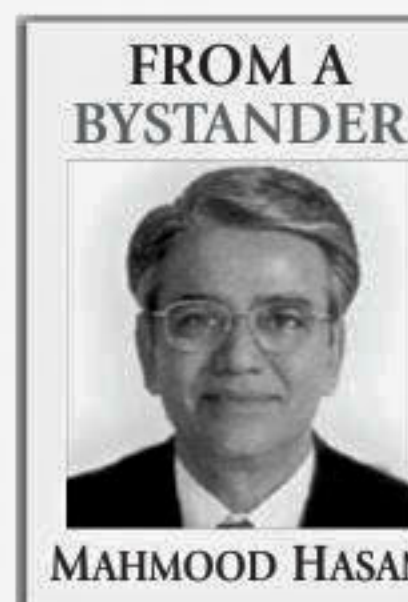
FRIEZE

Noun [FREEZ]

A sculptured or ornamented band.

Goa BRICS Summit

What did it accomplish?



FROM A BYSTANDER
MAHMOOD HASAN

INDIA hosted the eighth BRICS summit in Goa on October 15-16 amid much fanfare. The group was formed with five major emerging economies - Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa - with a view to challenging the existing global financial architecture (World Bank, IMF, etc) dominated by the West, particularly the US. These five

economies - representing 43 percent of world population, 30 percent of global GDP (over USD 17 trillion) and 17 percent of world trade - held its first summit in Russia in June 2009. Politically speaking, the summit came at a time when tension between India and Pakistan is at a worrying height. Discord and uneasiness is quite prominent within the group too. India-China relations are fraught with serious disagreement over territory and trade. Russia supports India and Brazil for permanent seats at the UN Security Council. But China is opposed to India's aspirations. After brushing off American anger over Syria, Russia and China are now pals, at least for the moment. Russia trying to befriend Pakistan, however, is not seen favourably by India. In short, divergent national interests of this disparate group have little in common and can hardly speak in one voice.

Global economic recovery is slow and uncertain amid threats of anti-globalisation. IMF is worried over low price of oil and other commodities, tightening of monetary policy in America, and the gradual slowdown of the Chinese economy. Within the BRICS group, two major economies, Russia and Brazil, have shrunk significantly in 2015, while South Africa posted low growth. Only India and China continue with positive growth, though much lower than before. Once a powerful group of emerging economies with considerable economic clout, BRICS is now lagging behind.

The two-day summit ended with the Goa Declaration. It is a routine document with lofty rhetoric. The declaration called for further strengthening solidarity and cooperation, highlighted dangers of growing anti-globalisation, challenges of climate change, etc. The paragraphs on economic and financial matters talk of different measures to stimulate growth, but do not speak of any synergy among the members.

However, the Declaration commended the setting up of the New Development Bank (NDB), which has gone into operation in 2015. NDB, with USD100 billion capital, is essentially a Beijing brainchild to challenge the World Bank and IMF. China floated the Bank with BRICS sponsorship, as it has an enormous foreign exchange reserve, which currently stands at USD 3.21 trillion. China's "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) vision needs the NDB to finance infrastructure in the expanding Chinese markets in Asian countries.

The only paragraph that draws attention is on

terrorism. Host Narendra Modi, without mentioning the name, lashed out at Pakistan, calling upon fellow BRICS leaders to take a strong united stand against what he called the "motherhood of terrorism". Pakistan was not named because of China's strong pro-Pakistan stand. In fact, even before the summit began the Indian media went on a frenzy, which gave the impression that the long agenda of the conference was condemning Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. In the process, Indian media had effectively diverted world attention from the Kashmir uprising, which has already cost ninety lives and the number is rising.

As is customary with G7 and G20, BRICS Chair Narendra Modi also invited the seven BIMSTEC leaders for a BRICS-BIMSTEC outreach summit on October 16. After refusing to attend the 19th Saarc summit in Islamabad, Delhi discovered that the best way to isolate and snub Pakistan would be to invite BIMSTEC leaders

business on the sidelines. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Modi signed 20 agreements, which included defence deals worth billions of dollars to modernise India's armed forces. Modi also raised the issue of Pakistan abetted terrorism and India's membership of Nuclear Suppliers Group with Xi Jinping. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina discussed the long pending issue of Teesta water sharing treaty with Modi while Xi Jinping discussed bilateral issues with Nepal's PM Pushpa Kumar Dahal.

Interestingly, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs came up with a novel elaboration of the acronym BRICS - "Building, Responsive, Inclusive, Collective, Solution" to prop up the summit, which many has criticised as outlandish and meaningless. Priorities of the summit were listed as: institution building, implementation, integration, innovation, continuity and consolidation. To any observer, these priorities will appear disjointed



Brics leaders at the recently concluded summit in Goa.

PHOTO: AFP

rather than Saarc leaders. Some media reports in India fancied it as a Saarc meeting without Pakistan. There is a growing chorus from some myopic chauvinists in India to expel Pakistan from Saarc, which is a self-defeating idea for South Asia.

The BIMSTEC headquartered in Dhaka had had only three summits since its inception in 1997. Lack of funds has been its main handicap. BIMSTEC and BRICS will have little to do for each other, except maybe for India and China. The BRICS-BIMSTEC interface hopefully will oblige India to give up its lackadaisical attitude towards the organisation. The statement, which appeared after BIMSTEC leaders met separately, contains pledges to work on the Bangkok Declaration (1997). Before the fourth BIMSTEC summit is to be held in Nepal in 2017, it should earnestly start working on regional connectivity.

Summits provide wonderful opportunities to participating leaders to transact serious bilateral

and bizarre. India also organised an under-17 football tournament, a film festival and a trade fair (skipped by China) to give the jamboree an aura of success.

Analysts have raised questions about BRICS' relevance to global economy. So far the only tangible achievement of BRICS is the NDB. It has not been able to unite on geopolitical issues. The leaders have not taken any concrete decision to stimulate the global economy. However, the summit gave PM Modi's popularity a boost in India for his strong anti-Pakistan stand.

It was actually a party of the dragon (China), the bear (Russia) and the elephant (India) who transacted some business, while the jaguar (Brazil) and the springbok (South Africa) were just onlookers. The mortar that keeps BRICS (bricks?) together is China, the second largest economy in the world. Without China, BRICS would fall apart.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

Selling a brand named nationalism



RAVINDRA KUMAR

IT'S time to worry when an utterly illogical proposition begins to sound half-way logical because it has been repeated over and over again, and because glaring gaps in reason have been plugged with dollops of nationalism. The ongoing cultural war between India and Pakistan, flagged off by a controversy surrounding the screening of a Bollywood film and culminating in a ban by Pakistan of all Indian content, is a case in point.

The Bollywood film stars a Pakistani actor, Fawad Khan, who apparently portrays an important role on the basis of a valid permit to work in India. He cannot be excised from the film without it having to be remade. He has acted in several Indian films without any questions having been asked. No one, it seems, asked him to swear an oath of loyalty to the Indian flag before letting him work.

From all accounts, Khan had finished shooting for the film when an Indian Army camp at Uri, Jammu and Kashmir, was attacked on September 18 by infiltrators from Pakistan.

Tensions between the two neighbours have reached a near fever pitch, especially after India announced it had carried out a surgical strike on terrorist staging posts across the Line of Control separating the two countries less than 10 days after the Uri attack.

In short, it is all but war and now the frontline troops are cineastes.

Earlier this month, an influential group of exhibitors announced they would not screen the film because it featured a Pakistani actor. The tenor of public discourse veered sharply down an ultra-nationalistic path with some influential television anchors leading discussion groups into agreeing that India ought to have no truck with actors and other creative persons from a country that has allowed its territory to be used as a base for terrorists.

The scalpel of reason would find several ways to slice up this proposition. For starters, in the seven decades since the partition of India, the country's film industry has thrived on the work of actors and directors with roots in Pakistan. Indeed, the first post-Independence generation of India's best known actors and directors were mostly born in what became Pakistan. Through the wars of 1948, 1965 and 1971, they worked successfully without their origins provoking nationalists or dissuading fans.

The offspring of many with ancestors in present-day Pakistan still rule the roost in Bollywood, their ruddy-pink complexions an essential ingredient of the manliness Indian viewers seek in heroes. If a link with Pakistan is the only basis for disqualification, they would all be out of work.

But that is not so much the problem for modern-day nationalists as it is the fact that the film industry - its many excesses, including dubious funding and frequent tomfoolery, notwithstanding - is largely a secular one, and places talent on a pedestal

while shunning parochialism.

This was once a source of pride, not just for the industry but for Indians. But in the strange reasoning that now makes up the dominant discourse in India, a secularist is actually pseudo-secular; a liberal or an intellectual must be a communist and every dissenter is a traitor. To this, add the unstated but implied proposition that every Muslim must be a Pakistani and a choke hold is applied on anyone who dares ask a question.

Not every film personality is secular, liberal, a dissenter or Muslim. But as with every creative field including journalism, filmhood has several who are one or the other, or in a few cases even all.

Once inconvenient voices are thus labelled up and shouted down, it is easy to see how the leap is accomplished from a contemptible attack on an Army camp to sending a film with a Pakistan actor into the doghouse. Two plus two doesn't make five because it is wrong but because some people say it is actually six.

This message when deciphered reads as follows - Pakistan, an enemy state, sends its terrorists to attack India's soldiers and its actors and performers to corrupt Indian minds. And the once-soft Indian state, held back for so long by liberals, secularists and dissenters, has now decided to target both terrorist and actor because being from Pakistan, an enemy state, each of them must equally be the enemy. Sadly, an increasing number of people see nothing wrong in this convoluted.

But it isn't just the matter of a single film. Viewing creativity through the nationalistic prism is fast threatening to

reach epic proportions on either side of a fractious border. Earlier this week, an iconic 1959 Pakistani film with Indian artistes was dropped from the Mumbai Academy of Moving Image festival following protests.

Pakistan for its part has announced a ban on all Indian television and radio content and has also stopped the screening of Indian films, presumably including those featuring Pakistani actors. There is a difference though; while the attacks in India come from various groups, they are not - at least not yet - the declared policy of the state. In Pakistan though, say reports, the ban is on direct orders of the government, which would presumably translate to being Islamabad's surgical strike on India.

Someone wise once called nationalism the result of state-sponsored branding. Many today in South Asia seem determined to promote their brand at the cost of their audience. And that is the most illogical aspect of this proposition. As the world worries if two nuclear-armed neighbours will go to war, they are busy spitting celluloid on each other.

The Asian Editors Circle is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers across the region.

The writer is Editor, The Statesman.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Gender equality requires micro-level development

I completely agree with the article "Discrimination against female farmers" published on October 20, 2016. I would like to add that women in rural areas are more exploited than those in urban areas because they are deprived of many facilities. To give equal opportunities to females, the government has to initiate development projects at the micro-level instead of implementing a top-down approach, in

order to prevent corruption. It may sometimes be difficult for them to reach the root level; in that case they can offer the responsibility to NGOs, who work to facilitate women empowerment from the micro-level.

Meanwhile, we as a society have to generate positive awareness and eliminate dominant male attitude.
Minhazur Rahman Rezwi
University of Dhaka

Congratulations to the youngest test player!

I wholeheartedly congratulate Mehedi Hasan Miraz who has had quite a splendid start in international cricket at age 18. He must have felt massive pressure as a debut player when captain Mushfiqur Rahim threw him the ball in the second over, but he handled it magnificently, while also giving England batsmen Ben Duckett, Joe Root, Gary Balance and Moeen Ali a

run for their money with his classic off spin.

We have just seen his brilliant bowling on his first day of test cricket and felt his presence in the test arena and two other formats as well. I hope he will stay in the international scene and continue his excellent performance.
Selim Reza Mridha
Chittagong University