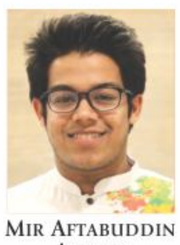
Promoting Brand Bangladesh abroad

How Bangladeshi student groups across the world can play a pivotal role in upholding our traditions and culture



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

WHEN a country has a population of over 160 million people, it is only natural for pockets of ever-growing expatriate communities to spring up across the world. A large component of such communities, especially in countries and cities with prospect for academic enhancement and immigration possibilities, tends to be students. Whilst it is true that the emigration of human capital towards countries such as Canada and Australia tends to have long run repercussions for Bangladeshi society in terms of permanent skill outflow, we cannot and must not ignore the role such individuals can play in promoting *Brand Bangladesh* across the world. A key mechanism to do so are bodies and organisations which represent Bangladeshi students across foreign universities and colleges.

As a Bangladeshi student at the University of Toronto, I have the privilege and honour of studying at an institute which embraces multiculturalism wholeheartedly. I am associated with several student groups, of which the Bangladeshi Students' Association (BSA-UTSG) takes precedence. Today, the BSA-UTSG has a membership list of over 1,000 members and alumni, with their primary aim being to promote, protect and preserve Bangladeshi culture at the university and the wider Toronto community. Over the past 20 years, this organisation has introduced core issues affecting Bangladesh, through the cultural lens of theatre, dance, music and other art forms. In doing so, this organisation has kept the Bangladeshi community at the university united in their quest to hold on to the values which we cherish as a nation. From addressing contentious issues such as corruption, inequality and mental health to encouraging *Nazrul Sangeet*, the university has also allowed this club to showcase contemporary problems and achievements in Bangladeshi society with the level of freedom and intellectual momentum needed to bring about large-scale awareness. In its totality, the BSA-UTSG has bridged the gap at the university community about the understanding of Bangladesh, and promoted a message of charitability, awareness and cultural dynamism needed to promote Bangladesh for what it is.

A performance by the Bangladeshi Students' Association of Louisiana State University. COURTESY: **FACEBOOK**

The above is just one single case. In Canada, top institutions such as Ryerson University, York University, McGill University and the University of British Columbia, amongst others, have given student groups from Bengali backgrounds an avenue to promote an understanding and practice of Bangladeshi culture. International students in these institutions have a space of comfort and togetherness—a relief amidst a stressful academic life. For many students who suffer from homesickness and depression, these groups give them a sense of belonging in a foreign community. As such, these student groups have played a profound role as a conduit for other students to learn about new cultures, whilst reminding them of their roots. Whether it is hosting BSA football tournaments, or coming together to celebrate Pahela Baishakh, each Bangladeshi student group has tried to introduce the best of what we have to offer as a country. As such, it was no surprise when the Ontario Provincial Legislature unanimously voted to make the month of March "Bangladesh Heritage Month" across Ontario; the BSA-UTSG was recognised in parliamentary remarks for their contribution to Canadian society. Given all this, the importance of expatriate socio-cultural clubs cannot and should not be ignored.

The only organisation in Bangladesh which has indeed successfully institutionalised the relationship between international students and alumni is the American Alumni Association (AAA). As an organisation which has tried to create a network of educated professionals, the AAA is a perfect example of how a strong structural basis can simultaneously support the promotion of Bangladeshi student enrolment at universities across the US and ensure widespread awareness of keeping our Bengali roots intact. So, what is the government's role in supporting such ventures?

Well, for starters, international students from Bangladesh require consular services across major cities which are popular destinations for higher education. It is laudable that the Bangladesh government has decided to open permanent consular service facilities in Toronto and other such major cities. Second, it is important for the state, whether it be through High Commissions in the respective countries or members of civil society, to encourage expatriate student groups to continue doing what they are doing.

A friend of mine in the Indian Students' Society at the University of Toronto was able to invite the Consul General of India to a debate about the demonetisation of the Indian rupee. The debate was heated as well as enlightening. But it made one wonder why Bangladeshis cannot have open discussions on core national issues with active participation from political individuals? Is it not time for government officials and Bangladeshi student groups to initiate processes of dialogue and intellectual arguments in international communities about issues affecting Bangladesh?

The likes of Professor Rehman Sobhan and Dr Kamal Hossain gave us an intellectual basis for our liberation struggle, following a global academic experience. Then why is it that we do not see expatriate students tangibly contributing more to public life in Bangladesh nowadays? In all certainty, if the state does not recognise the efforts of such small groups and communities in promoting and preserving Bangladeshi culture abroad, then it is difficult to imagine that these students will bring back innovative ideas to their homeland.

We need to institutionalise a greater network of international alumni with current students to enhance the professional experience of those in the tertiary education sector. Supporting and recognising such student bodies must take precedence if we are to appreciate their efforts and help them continue in their path of showing the global community what our history, values and beliefs are. For far too long have Bangladeshi expatriate communities been divided along the lines of partisan politics and personal disagreements. These communities can be part of the journey of Bangladesh by rising to the leadership of promoting *Brand Bangladesh* to our foreign friends and partners.

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A question of fair play

A tactical advantage given to the host nation is becoming the bane of Southeast Asian Games

Asian Editors Circle
ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

JUNE HL WONG

AROUND this time last year, Malaysians were on an emotional roller coaster that ranged from excitement, nervous hope, disappointment to unexpected joy. But it was all good because they were rooting for the same thing: their athletes to win Olympic and Paralympic gold.

The Rio Games were a landmark sporting event, not just for Malaysia but for Asean as it was the region's most successful Olympic outing with a total of 18 medals with two member states—Singapore and Vietnam—clinching their first gold.

For their sterling achievements, Thailand's women weightlifters Sopita Tanasan and Sukanya Srisurat, Vietnamese shooter Hoang Xuan Vinh and Singapore swimmer Joseph Schooling are household names in their countries.

This month, the chase for gold is back with the Southeast Asian, or SEA Games, held in Malaysia from August 19-30. Interest and excitement over Kuala Lumpur 2017 has been building up, thanks to good planning by the government and the success of our athletes at international competitions which have whetted the Malaysian sporting appetite and heightened expectations.

In April, national track cyclist and Rio bronze medallist Mohd Azizulhasni Awang won his first world title in keirin at the Track Cycling World Championships in Hong Kong. Others like water skier Aaliyah Yoong Hanifah, shuttlers Woon Khe Wei and Vivian Hoo and bowler Adrian Ang scored victories in major tournaments too.

Malaysia had its own giant-killer moments. Its 20-year-old swimmer Welson Sim beat Olympic champion Mack Horton in the 400m freestyle at the Mare Nostrum Tour Swimming Championship in June and Olympic silver medallist Cheong Jun Hoong became diving world champion in the 10m platform individual at the July World Aquatics Championships in Hungary, breaking China's dominance in the sport.

The Paralympians, who won Malaysia's first gold medals in the Rio Paralympics, have continued to do well. Long jumper Abdul Latif Romly and shot putter Ziyad Zolkefli were champions at last month's World Para Athletics Championships in London, setting new records in the process.

For a country sorely in need of a uniting force, Kuala Lumpur 2017 couldn't have come at a better time.

Over the last several years, race relations have been deteriorating to a state where almost every issue is seen through race or religious-coloured lenses in the most negative way.

Yet, when the likes of Cheong, Azizulhasni, Sim and Ziyad won, they were feted and praised by their fellow citizens, regardless of their race and religion. That's because in sport, only true talent, grit and discipline can bring about success and one's ethnicity is incidental.

The Games, held for 12 days and ending a day before Malaysia's 60th national day on August 31, are perfectly timed to raise patriotic fervour and national pride. If all goes well and Malaysia emerges as overall winner boosting positive public sentiment and goodwill, many predict the next general election will follow suit.

Goodwill was also a factor in the formation of the original SEA Games in 1959. The rationale then was that a regional multi-sports event would promote co-operation and good relations among Southeast Asian states.

Yet, there is a peculiar aspect to the Games that actually creates tension and dissatisfaction among the participating nations.

The Games are regulated by the Southeast Asian Games Federation (SEAGF) whose charter sets a minimum of 22 sports, with priority given to disciplines already in the Olympic and Asian Games. But it also allows the host nation to decide what sports to drop and include.

And in recent years, this leeway has become a tactical tool for the host nation to increase its chances of maximising its medal tally.

Indeed, controversy erupted last year when Malaysia proposed dropping many sports like bodybuilding, canoeing, fencing, women's soccer, wrestling, women's boxing, women's weightlifting, judo and eight events considered compulsory under athletics, including the marathon, steeplechase and decathlon.

Several countries reacted by threatening a boycott and the Asian Athletics Association issued a warning. The dust has since settled and instead of the 34 sports with 342 events proposed by Malaysia, the final list has 38 sports with 405 events.

But some sports like women's weightlifting were still left out which ruled out Sopita Tanasan, Sukanya Srisurat and Philippines' Olympic silver medallist Hidilyn Diaz from competing in Kuala Lumpur.

Malaysia has included winter sports—ice hockey and ice skating—which is a first for the Games, presumably because it will increase its golden haul.

Still, what Malaysia has done isn't new. Vietnam introduced fin swimming in 2003, the Philippines added baseball and dancesport in 2005, Thailand created new categories of *sepak takraw* (kick volleyball) in 2007; Indonesia brought in roller skating and wall climbing in 2011 and Myanmar slipped in its indigenous and obscure sport called *chinlone* in 2013. And in 2015, Singapore added floorball.

The problem with this manipulation, which has been described as a form of gerrymandering, is that it can affect the standing of the Games. As Pattharapong Rattanasevee of Burapha University, Thailand, commented, it can lead to "a growing perception that the SEA Games are no longer about fair play."

Neither is it really good for Asean unity. Instead, Pattharapong suspects it fans historical rivalries and animosities among its members.

Admittedly, the list of sports for the Olympics changes, too, with new ones added and old ones dropped. But the decisions are made by the International Olympic Committee, usually seven years before implementation, and not just a year's notice as with the SEA Games.

With Asean turning 50, it is high time that this hosting "right" is reviewed. A sport should be dropped and a new one introduced for the right reasons, not for the sake of one-upmanship.

If more and more Southeast Asian athletes are able to compete in international tournaments and win, they should be able to do the same in their own backyard and not need their governments to manipulate the playing field just for bragging rights.

Political leaders will always want to use sports to rally support for themselves in the guise of patriotism, but citizens in many countries know too well how gerrymandering can lead to unfair advantage in political contests. That shouldn't be allowed to taint sports contests.

For now, the SEA Games remain strong and worthwhile supporting because the competition is still real. May it be so in the years to come.

June HL Wong is the former group chief editor of Star Media Group, Malaysia, now its chief operating officer for content development.

This is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors and columnists from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers and websites across the region.

A WORD A DAY

TROUVAILLE

noun

A lucky find

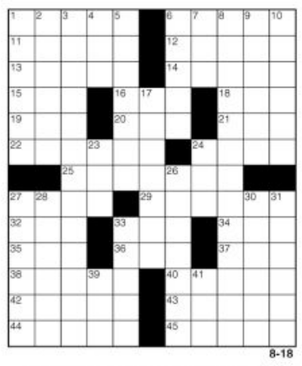
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 It has a blade
6 They may be read
11 Love, in Lombardy
12 "Adam Bede" author
13 Haste
14 Annoyed state
15 Bowler, e.g.
16 Easy mark
18 Try out
19 Yale rooter
20 Use a crowbar
21 Above, poetically
22 District
24 Blunders
25 Football pass
27 Salon sound
29 Letter strokes
32 Snapshot
33 Sch. support group
34 Manx, for one
35 Skating surface
36 Oahu or Maui: Abbr.
37 Memorable period
38 Role for Arnold
40 Stately home
42 Commercial cow
43 Follow
44 Reacts to a punch
45 Russian refusals

DOWN

1 Gets ready for dinner
2 Stab
3 Writer's liberty
4 Before, poetically
5 Jupiter feature
6 Energetic
7 Boxing great
8 Tavern need
9 Farm cat
10 Takes the wheel
17 Collars
23 Spigot
24 Anvil's place
26 Macho sorts
27 White House spokesman Sean
28 Kidman of "The Others"
30 Bizarre
31 Rude looks
33 Needle sources
39 Feel poorly
41 One or more



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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BEETLE BAILEY — BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES — BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT