

Unjoking the jokes for a very serious nation



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

BANGLADESH is the name of a serious nation. I could say "dull" but that would be a misnomer. We are not dull because sometimes we're capable of demonstrating a

perfect understanding of the importance of *not* being dull. We know a four-letter-word when we see one. And we hate to have any kind of association with it. That sentiment alone, and the fact that we can produce an outrageous, absurdly clickbait headline every other minute, would disqualify us from the contest for the world's most boring nation.

But seriousness—oh boy, do we love seriousness. We are a nation that specialises in seriousness (no pun intended). It's in our DNA. The working principle is: "You tell me a joke and I'll give you a flag. Write a satire and I'll give you a lesson in history. Draw a cartoon and I'll tell you what a prison cell looks like."

Imagine a normal day. You wake up a Bangladeshi. You go out on the streets, and suddenly it's all Japanese everywhere you turn. Glum-faced, office-going dudes clinging to the bus door and discussing—yes, you guessed it right—politics, or price hikes, or some conspiracy theories that only exist in a public bus. The politicians, apparently, are public enemy number one, yet everyone is obsessed with them.

At schools and colleges, you've teachers being teachers, forever telling you how to behave. At office, you have colleagues being just that. No office romance, mind you! At the shopping malls, you have men and women shopping crazily like their life depends on it.

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So sometimes it gets difficult for the few people who are not as serious. Just think, how many times did you have to explain a joke just because the other person didn't get it? How many times did you see someone having a good laugh and then stopping suddenly, thinking they've had too much of it?

When we're happy and have a good laugh, we get scared. We start having second thoughts. Good times mean bad times are coming, right? We get panicky.

Let me share a little secret about how I get my laugh. On days when I'm feeling particularly down, I turn my "Donald Trump" mode on and look at

life the way he does. You would be surprised to know how the mind of the president of our favourite war-starting, planet-polluting, arms-exporting country works.

It's not that difficult, really. He laughs when he's happy, complains when he is not, says whatever his mind wants to, and types with the same freedom that a two-year-old operates his dad's cell phone keypad. The evidence is legion.

Just last Sunday, for instance, he tweeted about his favourite nemesis, the Angry Man in the North: "Why would Kim Jong-un insult me by calling me 'old', when I would NEVER call him 'short and fat'? Oh well, I try so hard to be his friend - and maybe someday that will happen!"

While the rest of humanity was busy barraging him with unsolicited advice

on how to be un-presidential, I turned my DT mode on and gave the 71-year-old child a pat on his shoulder, in my mind, that is. And I said: I get you, Donald. No POTUS should be serious about their job. It's safer for the world.

But for many others, understanding a joke is the difficult part. Take the *Star Weekend*, which recently published a news satire about the mysterious Subodh graffiti artist, only to realise what it feels like when the "air" from "satire" is sucked out, and left with the proverbial pine box with a bunch of bewildered readers peering inside, looking for meaning.

The story was published with "SATIRE" written prominently at the top. Any other satire platform would have deemed it unnecessary, for what's the point of writing a satire if the joy of reading it is killed even before one

starts reading it?

But we being we made it totally worthwhile. Not only did we not get the satire, even after an unprecedented, second mention of "SATIRE" inside the headline, we dissected the piece part by part to show why satire is overrated. Which makes me think, when The Joker delivered his famous line, "Why so serious? Let's put a smile on that face!" he probably meant us, his fun-hating, humour-resisting fans in Bangladesh, who take their life a little too seriously.

Speaking of jokes, it's okay that not every joke triggers the same response. The other day, an Indonesian friend, who is doing a course on English, shared a joke with me via messenger. It went like: A duck walks into a bar and sits down on a barstool. Animal Control is called immediately. They capture the duck, and set it free at a nearby pond!

While I was trying to figure out which part of this is funny, my friend gave me several virtual variations of "haha" and "hehe." I felt defeated. Later, I learned, courtesy of Urban Dictionary, that it is actually an unjoke, the opposite of a joke, although it has the same appearance. What's funny about unjokes is that they aren't funny at all, and you don't laugh unless you're desperate. I got my pride back.

So as all jokes and unjokes end with a punchline, here's mine: we, as a nation, should learn to lighten up a little more. Jokes, satires, cartoons, caricatures, and other such devices offer us a different perspective on life—a bit of poetic justice too, if you will—and help us unwind. A little laugh, even for an unjoke, doesn't hurt. So why so serious, Bangladesh?

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Culture, US Bangladeshis and the next generation



ASHFAQUR SWAPAN

WHEN Bangladeshis move abroad, they take with them a little piece of Bangladesh in their hearts.

The results are not always salubrious—expatriate communities are rife with bitter Awami League-BNP feuds that are relitigated *ad nauseum*.

There is, however, a gentler, more tender and beautiful manifestation of a love of our identity that endures despite geographical displacement of tens of thousands of miles. Bangladeshi communities here in the US mark the Bengali New Year, gather for musical soirees, and enthusiastically go to concerts by visiting performers.

However, Bangladeshi American immigrants have also come to the poignant realisation that all of this will end with the passing of first-generation immigrants. The new generation of Bangladeshi Americans growing up in this country do not share their parents' cultural affinity. The hurdles are simply too daunting. An unfamiliarity with the language, culture and history simply makes culture too inaccessible. I frequently see young kids idling about listlessly, in what I call "whatever" mode, at Bangladeshi events.

Yet cultural identity matters. While it's wonderful that kids growing up in the US are learning how to fit into mainstream America, it adds immensely to their sense of identity to develop some sense of their immigrant heritage as well.

I was dazzled by the results of an attempt by one Bangladeshi family to do just that. Rati Roshni Sarkar, a college-bound youth,



Bangladeshi American Rati Roshni Sarkar performing her "arangetram" at the Hindu Temple of Atlanta.

presented a spectacular performance of *bharatanatyam* at the Hindu Temple of Atlanta. Rati's parents Bishwanath and Rishita Sarkar are Atlanta-based entrepreneurs.

Rati's event was an *arangetram*, a formal premiere public performance of a trainee of South Indian classical dance after years of instruction.

This begs the question: This is not exactly Bangladeshi, is it? Well, yes and no.

Bear with me as I explain. As immigrants in the US, we quickly become aware that culturally our identity

expands into a broader South Asian rubric. Whether it's ghazals of Pakistan's Ghulam Ali or Mehdi Hassan, the craft of Hindustani classical music exponents like vocalist Rashid Khan, flautist Hariprasad Chaurasia or sarod player Amjad Ali Khan—all of this is a part of our rich cultural heritage.

In that sense, Rati's foray into *bharatanatyam* is entirely appropriate.

There is another simple logistical reason. Bishwanath and Rishita didn't want their daughter to simply dabble in cultural activity. They wanted her to engage seriously in a

certain aspect of it. In the US, the options for that are limited. You can possibly take training in Hindustani classical music, and then there is South Indian classical dance.

The South Indian, primary Tamil, expatriate community in the US is dead serious about preserving their heritage. Dance schools providing instruction in classical dance here retain the same rigour as in the old country. Students train for years, the regime is demanding, and expectations are high.

It turns out that Rati's *bharatanatyam* training had a distinct Bengali touch. Her instructor Anupa Guha Thakurta, who runs the Deeksha School of Dance, is a Kolkata-raised Bengali. Her performances, while following the classical format of a traditional *arangetram*, included performances to an invocation of Durga, the revered deity of Bengalis, as well as a Bengali song on the eternal romance of Radha and Krishna.

What really stood out was the sheer excellence of her performance. Years of rigorous

practice gave her performance a degree of depth and assurance that showed. Rati, a little slip of a girl barely out of high school, danced with the enormous skill, grace and panache of a fully developed performer.

She proved that in art, as elsewhere in life, anything worthwhile is the fruit of sustained, conscientious hard work.

And spare a thought for the parents, who went through years of hard work. Rati started her first lessons when she was four. Her father Bishwanath has no regrets. "Because of *bharatanatyam* from the start, Rati has learned what her culture is and where her roots start from," he told me.

For Rati, this is a life-long gift. Once you master a craft seriously, it's a cultural asset for life.

"Finishing my *arangetram* is not the ending, it is just the beginning," Rati told me. "It has opened many doors for me in the past and I know if I stick with this amazing passion I have for classical dance, I will continue to achieve many opportunities. Aside from my studies, my career, dance will always find its special fit in my life. Not because it wants to, but because I want it to."

Rati hints that it's not going to end with her, either. She told me that she recently told Rishita: "Mom, when I have a daughter, I want to train her and be her guru for dance and especially her *arangetram*. I want to be the one on stage with her giving her the *taalam* (beats) and handing her the certificate not only from a guru's type of love but from a mother's love. I want her to feel the same amazing feelings I felt when I completed mine. That's be so-o-o cool, right? But please don't ask what happens if I have a son, I haven't thought that far out yet!"

Ashfaqur Swapan is a contributing editor for *Siliconeer*, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States.

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QUOTABLE Quote

JEREMY IRONS
ENGLISH ACTOR

We all have our time machines. Some take us back, they're called memories. Some take us forward, they're called dreams.

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