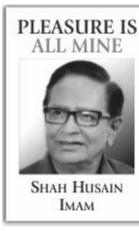


Reflections on the Pope's visit



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE
As the impressions of Pope Francis' back-to-back visits to Myanmar and Bangladesh sink in, some self-evident truths glare through the mists of Naypyidaw, the new

Burmese capital. The viciousness and tyranny of the military junta were writ large on their manipulative dictation of terms to a venerated visitor like the Pope. On the other hand, the pontiff, the leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, was expected to wield moral influence on perpetrators of nothing short of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

The predators are degraded further by their disdain for civilised conduct consistent with values of a rule-based society.

Much as the pontiff was walking a diplomatic tightrope and his hosts helled on using the opportunity of his high-profile visit to repeat their untenable, assailable and pariah-like positions on basic human rights of a section of its nationals, the Pope couldn't afford to be acquiescent.

Reputably an outspoken Pope who set out from the Vatican having issued two appeals for support to "our Rohingya brothers and sisters," he would cease to use the word "Rohingya" altogether during his whole sojourn in Myanmar!

The Pope changed the tack on advice from the local Roman Catholic archbishop to avert "wrath" on the Christian minority and not let his dialogue with the government and the



Pope Francis is greeted by Myanmar's civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Naypyidaw on November 28, 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

monks be "slammed shut." *The Guardian* reported on the prevailing mood in so many words—any reference to the ethnic Muslim minority could trigger a "firestorm" as the term "Rohingya" was "reviled" by the military and the Buddhist majority alike since it denoted Bengali migrants. The mix of "Muslim" caused a double jeopardy.

According to a Reuters report, Pope Francis defended his strategy of avoiding the term "Rohingya" in Myanmar to reporters aboard the plane returning to Rome. He believed he got his message through to both the

civilian and military leadership "without shutting down dialogue." The pontiff also said that he had been "firm with Myanmar's military leaders in private meetings about the need for them to respect the rights of Rohingya refugees." "It was a good conversation," he said, and the "truth was non-negotiable" viz. the latest exodus from Myanmar to Bangladesh of around 625,000 people following a Myanmar military crackdown in (an unequal) response to militant attacks on security outposts on August 25. Before leaving Myanmar the Pope

significantly called for an overture from the international community to resolve the Rohingya crisis in all its dimensions. He knows that a bilateral initiative has got underway, and yet he is making a plea for broader involvement (supposedly that of UN) to bring a successful closure to the stupendous humanitarian crisis.

The Pope wants to please everybody; he is very alert to the sensibilities of other religions. His inter-faith dialogues may help enhance communal harmony. His humane side came to light when he wept upon hearing the Rohingyas relate

their traumatic stories. He looked away with rolling tears so as not to be seen in that kind of emotional state. Why that is, one wonders!

He told a crowd where the Rohingyas were in a cluster that God's presence was within them. He asked for forgiveness from the sufferers and victims, reflecting, one would have thought, a sense of collective failure.

The cloak-and-dagger policy is perhaps laced in Myanmar's DNA. In January this year, a prominent Muslim lawyer named Ko Ni who had been a long-standing legal adviser to Aung San Suu Kyi and reportedly working on a constitutional amendment was gunned down outside the Yangon airport.

Back in the mid-seventeenth century, poet and lyricist of *Padmavati* fame Alaol, a son of Faridpur, became an important person in the court of Magan Thakur, the chief minister of Rosang (Arakan). But he would fall out with the royalty and eventually die from heartbreak, poverty and starvation. His famous work on the book titled *Saifulmulk* could not be finished by him.

Around that time, in an unfortunate coincidence, Shah Shuja, Governor of Bengal and Odissa, the second son of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, strayed into Arakan and was murdered in 1661. In a pathetic turn of fortunes, one of his daughters Gulrukh Banu Begum was forcibly married by Arakan King Sanda Thudhamma. Legend goes that she died in mysterious circumstances. What a tragic end to a Mughal lineage!

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Pope Francis defended his strategy of avoiding the term "Rohingya" in Myanmar to reporters aboard the plane returning to Rome. He believed he got his message through to both the civilian and military leadership.

Why Sophia's moral calls sound hollow



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

I was 16 years old when I first touched a computer. It was after my Dakhil exams when the madrasa administration decided that it

was time we got ourselves introduced to the world of machines. I still remember the hesitance with which I approached the makeshift lab in the furthest corner of our dorm displaying a couple of freshly unpacked desktops. Computer, apparently, was a tool that looked like a TV but wasn't. Our instructor told us that the name came from "compute," so I assumed it was a calculator.

But then I discovered that you could also read, write, paint, and play games with this machine. And wonder of wonders, all this you could do with a mouse that doesn't run at the slightest provocation like its slightly less charming counterparts in the animal world!

Fast forward 16 years and 35km away in Dhaka. I enter home to be greeted by my five-year-old niece, who tells me excitedly about Sophia the robot who looks like a girl but is not, but can think, talk and laugh just the same. She shows me a video clip in which a jubilant prime minister talks to Sophia about her vision of a Digital Bangladesh.

No, this piece isn't about how technology has ushered in an era in which kids do what their grown-up relatives couldn't have foreseen in their wildest imaginings when they were kids themselves. Nor is it a critique of the changes that technology has brought along with it. But there is something about a system that gets humanoid robots to talk about issues in our life that doesn't feel quite normal.

To be clear, Sophia can do more than just chat or smile. She can recog-

nise you, answer your questions, and even ask one or two back. She can also blink her eyes, give expressions and crack jokes—a scientific marvel that has fascinated kids and adults alike. Modelled after the late British actress and fashion icon Audrey Hepburn, Sophia uses a mix of artificial intelligence, visual data processing and facial recognition technolo-

gies to interact, and identifies with the feminine forms of self-expression.

In short, Sophia is a piece of software with the brain of a computer and the form of a human. On the opening day of the four-day tech festival Digital World in Dhaka, she appeared in a beautiful, sparkling yellow gown made of *jamdani* and

diluted with white, with her mechanical forearms visible to the audience. She beguiled Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina with her knowledge of her family and her accomplishments, and also talked about the visible landmarks of ICT in Bangladesh and other initiatives that are going to transform the country.

All eyes were transfixed on Sophia

and about rights for all human beings and all living beings on this planet," said Hanson Robotics CEO David Hanson, who created Sophia.

The Saudi reference is of particular significance here. The kingdom does not have the most flattering records when it comes to gender equality or human rights, yet it happens to be

the country that granted citizenship to Sophia in October 2017, in a move that has shocked the human rights defenders who looked with suspicion at the Saudi attempt to plant its name on anything related to Sophia.

Even after the Dhaka tech festival's inauguration, the Jeddah-based *Arab News* published a story with a headline that proudly declared: "Saudi humanoid robot Sophia wows Bangladesh," and called her "arguably the world's most famous robot." The Saudi enthusiasm can be linked to its goal to win favours in certain circles hostile to its interests and its ambitious agenda to become the dominant power in the Middle East.

Some AI ethicists have also noted the grim irony of a robot receiving "rights" in a country where women were allowed to drive only recently. The fact is, any country that has considerable money and influence can host and even grant citizenship to Sophia, who is now a global star thanks to the media frenzy over artificial intelligence.

The emergence of AI-driven, humanoid robots is significant on a technological front. Their possibilities are endless and can enormously change how we live our lives. But expecting them to do anything about real-life issues facing the humanity, such as transforming the lives of people in a poor country like Bangladesh or ensuring the rights for everyone in the world, will be expecting too much.

So, I keep my trust in the flesh-and-blood humans feeling our pain and happiness, understanding the nuances of how a human mind works, making mistakes and correcting them, and guiding us in the right direction eventually. Sophia may be a darling of the tech-savvy millennials and enterprises for the purpose she serves temporarily, but that purpose isn't necessarily linked to saving the world's furthest behind.

Sophia's moral calls—and of

those behind her—rang particularly hollow after her arrival was announced via an NRB advertisement published in various newspapers. Placed beside the notice in one newspaper was a report about children facing poverty and malnutrition in Kurigram, a district that houses the highest number of poor people in Bangladesh. Sophia's

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expensive tour may have added some feathers in some people's caps, but those poor people will continue to suffer long after she is gone.

Unless, of course, we humans do something about it.

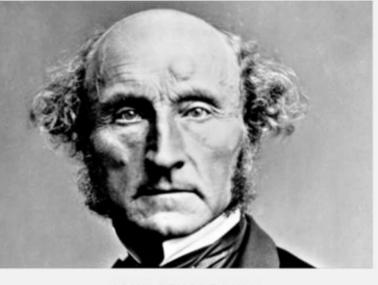
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Sophia the robot, centre, with her creator David Hanson, right, and Bangladeshi State Minister for Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology Zunaid Ahmed Palak.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

QUOTABLE Quote



JOHN STUART MILL
British philosopher, political economist and civil servant

How can great minds be produced in a country where the test of great minds is agreeing in the opinion of small minds?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Receive eagerly
 - 6 Thrifty person
 - 11 Pol's concern
 - 12 Higher than
 - 13 Stingy
 - 15 French article
 - 16 Gaul invader
 - 17 Make mistakes
 - 18 Audio download
 - 20 Doctor's charge
 - 21 Tell tales
 - 22 Red-ink amount
 - 23 Indian lute
 - 26 Cavalry stations
 - 27 Deuce topper
 - 28 London weather
 - 29 Long time
 - 30 From abroad
 - 34 Purpose
 - 35 Grog base
 - 36 "The Matrix" hero
 - 37 Indiscreet
 - 40 Bert's buddy
 - 41 Lead to
 - 42 Takes ten
 - 43 Pays to play
 - 8 Select on a ballot
 - 9 Neighbor of K2
 - 10 Set right
 - 14 Join together
 - 19 Potter's stuff
 - 22 Theater box
 - 23 Pittsburgh pro
 - 24 Smelter input
 - 25 Muscle connectors
 - 26 Countertop material
 - 28 Ref's call
 - 30 Sets loose
 - 31 Advice
 - 32 Gaggle group
 - 33 Network points
 - 38 Command to Spot
 - 39 Skillet
- DOWN**
- 1 Became cheerful
 - 2 Acid type
 - 3 Summoned to the phone
 - 4 "That's gross!"
 - 5 Common allergen
 - 6 Virtuous one
 - 7 Crunch targets

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

C	L	A	S	P	H	O	P	E
R	U	M	O	R	I	N	E	P
U	N	I	T	E	T	O	R	A
M	A	G	S	A	M	H	U	E
B	R	A	K	E	P	E	D	A
			O	N	E	E	P	E
A	P	A	R	T	L	A	S	T
M	A	C	E	T	E	L		
B	R	E	A	K	W	A	T	E
L	O	T	N	O	D	R	A	T
E	L	O	P	E	O	S	A	K
R	E	N	E	E	F	U	S	E
D	E	N	S	F	E	E	D	S

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

