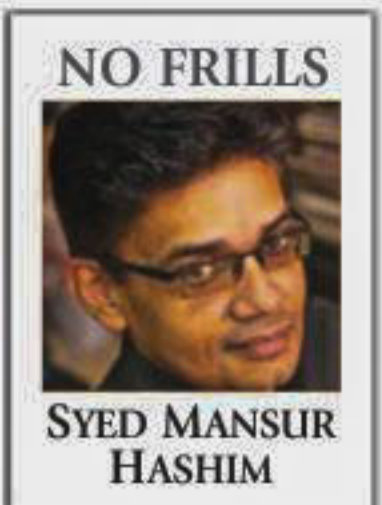


When our freedom of movement is restricted



NO FRILLS
SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE Henley & Partners Visa Restrictions Index 2017 puts the Bangladeshi passport ranking at 96 out of the 199 countries surveyed (a lower score means better). Our situation worsened over the course of one year (the previous year's rank was 95). The index is a "global ranking of countries according to the travel freedom their citizens enjoy." It is prepared in coordination with the International Air Transport Association (IATA), an organisation that maintains the world's largest database of travel information and one that is published annually. According to a report published in a leading English daily, Bangladesh's ranking in the index has gone down 23 ranks since 2008 and now stands at 38 (which is one point down since last year).

In 2006, we had visa-free access to 28 countries. This rose to 42 in 2010, but since then it has been on the decline. Over the same period, Indian passport holders' access has risen from 25 to 49.



plunging again. In 2006, we had visa-free access to 28 countries. This rose to 42 in 2010, but since then it has been on the decline. Over the same period, Indian passport holders' access has risen from 25 to 49, while Sri Lanka has done very well, i.e. its citizens can travel to 41 countries (which is nearly double the number of countries in 2006, which was 22). So, the Bangladeshi passport is not very powerful. To think that North Koreans have more ease of travel than us is simply off-putting. Disheartening as it may sound, that is the ground reality. Countries in the region where we can go with relative ease with either e-visa or visa-on-arrival are Cambodia, Bhutan, Nepal, etc. We also have visa on entry to countries like Antigua and Barbuda, which is defined as "a sovereign state in the Americas," two islands lying between the Caribbean and the Atlantic Ocean. Our citizens can get visa on arrival to countries like the Comoros, which is, again, an island known as "a sovereign archipelago island nation in the Indian Ocean located at the northern end of the Mozambique Channel off the eastern coast of Africa." But the moment we need to visit countries with which we have significant economic relations—and we are not talking about India with whom we have a multi-billion-dollar bilateral trade, but any nation that is important to us economically or

commercially—Bangladeshis inevitably face visa restrictions. We also face restrictions in case of countries that do not feature prominently on our economic landscape. Bangladesh is suffering from an image crisis in the West as being a "high risk" country. Recently, a retired foreign diplomat working for an aid agency visited Bangladesh, and her movements have been highly restricted by that country's embassy. Security is of paramount importance for any foreign dignitary but given that the country has not faced any major terrorist incident for over a year now, one cannot but be surprised at the level of precautions being taken by foreign missions when it comes to their citizens visiting the country. Hundreds of

thousands of Bangladeshis, mostly economic migrants, travel to foreign labour markets in search of work, and although we now have machine readable passports, made mandatory for every Bangladeshi citizen, we have not been able to get over our "image" problem.

There are reasons why foreign countries have been less than enthusiastic about letting Bangladeshis into their countries, and it has nothing to do with the threat of terrorism. We have only ourselves to blame for the fact that there is a tendency among many of our citizens to stay back in the host countries when their visas expire. People sometimes circumvent the official channel to get into countries that require cheap labour, and this is not restricted to Europe. There are no exact figures about how many of our countrymen have overstayed their visas in foreign lands, but the net effect is a souring of moods in foreign capitals against Bangladeshis. There have been allegations related to getting passports without proper background checks. There have been cases where stateless people residing on our soil obtained passports and travelled abroad to engage in illegal work, getting caught, and thereby giving Bangladesh a bad name. There is also the sticky issue of a section of manpower agencies who falsify travel documentation, including passports to try and get hapless Bangladeshis into lucrative labour markets in the Middle East.

These are all undeniable facts and which are hardly lost upon foreign countries. The net result of all these illegitimate actions, of course, is that ordinary Bangladeshis who have a legitimate reason to travel abroad cannot do so because of the elaborate visa requirements put up by foreign countries to deter the illegal ones. Legitimate travellers are subject to the highest scrutiny by border agencies at points of entry into foreign countries. We must suffer humiliation because the green passport we carry is looked down upon. And we are largely to blame for that.

It is really up to our authorities to crack down on the loopholes in the system if we want our rating to improve. In this age of globalised economic order, being relegated to the lower half of a well-established rating index does little for Bangladeshis who must travel abroad. And we are not talking about a few thousands going abroad for medical treatment or higher studies; millions of our citizens are working abroad and earning essential foreign exchange that help the wheels of the economy turn in the right direction, help us with our balance of payments, and give us the option to undertake major infrastructure projects. And we are letting all our citizens down because we can't seem to get our act in order, which is quite pathetic.

Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

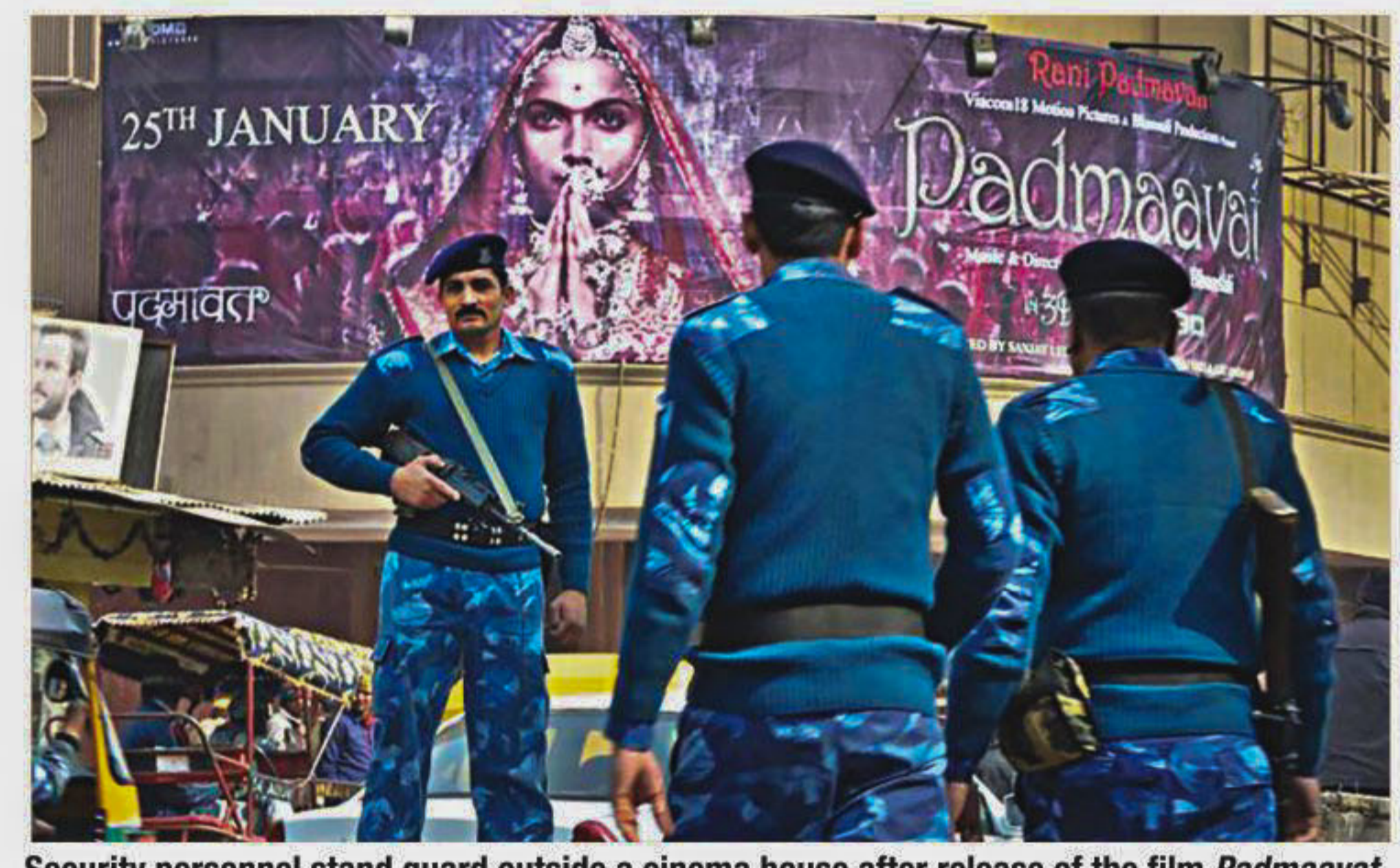
Casualties all round when history is a battleground

Fights over the "right" version of history may well perpetuate divisions far into the future



ZAKIR HUSSAIN

A national day that's been marked for over 80 years. The launch of an epic movie based on events 700 years ago, with one of the most lavish budgets for a Bollywood film. A new museum displaying maps, letters and newspaper articles. All three developments have made headlines over the past week. In better times, they would have been occasions for celebration in Australia, India and Japan, respectively. Yet they have drawn strong condemnation and protests, with repercussions for communal as well as regional harmony. History and how it is portrayed have long been divisive issues within and between countries. But in an age when fake news is gaining ground and facts are contested, history—and different takes on it—appears to have resurfaced as a battleground.



Security personnel stand guard outside a cinema house after release of the film Padmaavat in Delhi. PHOTO: PTI

Day have gained momentum in recent years, with sizeable protests this year. This, in turn, has spawned an ugly backlash from some who insist colonisation was a "good thing" for indigenous Australians. In a column lamenting this tide of hostility on both sides, The Australian newspaper's editor-at-large Paul Kelly wrote of how the country could be the poorer. "This debate can break one of two ways: robust differences can generate a better understanding of Australia and its national day, or the upshot can be a destructive orgy of self-interested identity politics leading to a diminished and divided country," he said. "The volatility of social media, the power of negative politics and the emotional manipulation around 'invasion day' constitute sufficient warning that things could go badly wrong. A nation ignorant of its history or simply unable to handle its history is heading for trouble in the present age of populist and cheapjack disruption. "The issue is whether we have the maturity to hold together conflicting truths and sort things through, or whether we choose ideological indulgence and cynical zero-sum politics," he added. "Tearing one truth down in the cause of

another is the road to ruin for Australia. Both truths need to be confronted and engaged." Historical facts mean different things to different people, especially when they are deeply bound up with ethnic or religious identities. These identities were behind tensions in India where violent protests marked the opening of the Bollywood epic, Padmaavat. Groups critical of the film took issue with it for distorting history by portraying a Muslim ruler as the "lover" of 13th-century Hindu queen Padmavati of the Rajput warrior clan, but the film-makers deny the accusation. Protesters burnt tyres and vandalised shops to oppose the film's release, prompting cinema owners in several states to abandon plans for screenings. This opposition came even after film censors suggested that the movie, originally titled Padmavati, be renamed Padmaavat after the 16th-century poem that the film was inspired by. India's Supreme Court also cleared the way for the film's release and blocked state governments from imposing bans on it. Bollywood films that touch upon historical relationships between Hindus, who belong to the country's majority religion, and Muslim

leaders have become controversial in recent years. A 2015 film by Padmaavati's director about the historic romance between a Hindu king and a princess whose mother was Muslim, titled Bajirao Mastani, stoked similarly strong protests. Observers note that inter-religious relationships and romances have existed throughout history, but depictions on the silver screen appear to take on a different sheen. Religious harmony and coexistence have long been the prevailing norm in India, but such controversies, when amplified and misrepresented for political gain, could generate tensions and divide communities. Ironically, the protests over Padmaavat took place on the day Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted all 10 Asean leaders for a special summit where he underlined the strong historical ties between both sides—including through religion.

historically also been tolerant. Yet there are concerns that such disputes over history, if they spread, could disrupt harmony in this region too. History has also long divided nations. And in East Asia, it continues to cast a long shadow. Take Japan, where a government-sponsored exhibition highlighting Japanese sovereignty over islands with disputed claims by China and South Korea opened its doors in Tokyo last Thursday. The Japan Times reported that while the exhibition is likely to draw praise from right-leaning politicians, the opening takes place at a delicate time for Japan's relations with both its key neighbours. On display are historical documents—maps, letters and newspaper articles, among others—highlighting the official position that the Senkaku or Diaoyu islands, controlled by Japan but claimed by China, and Takeshima or Dokdo, controlled by South Korea but claimed by Japan, are parts of Japanese territory. The newspaper quoted a 70-year-old Tokyo resident as saying: "It is important to debate these topics from an objective point of view using facts." However, these facts have created friction—China has rebuked Japan, and South Korea called for the museum to be closed. The issue is set to remain fraught for the foreseeable future. People have a right to stake claims to the histories they want celebrated, or are opposed to. Those calling for Australia Day to be scrapped, Padmaavat to be banned, or the museum to be celebrated may well have strong arguments to back their cases; and it is not for outsiders to determine the merits of these cases. But they should also realise that their actions could well be met with equally vigorous responses—and result in consequences that could spiral out of control, from tourists rethinking their travel plans to further tensions in a region that could do with less of them. Instead of solving present-day problems, fights over history may well end up perpetuating divisions well into the future.

Zakir Hussain is Foreign Editor at The Straits Times. Copyright: The Straits Times/ANN

In an age when fake news is gaining ground and facts are contested, history—and different takes on it—appears to have resurfaced as a battleground.

"The Ramayana, the ancient Indian epic, continues to be a valuable shared legacy in Asean and the Indian subcontinent," he said. "Other major religions, including Buddhism, also bind us closely. Islam in many parts of South-east Asia has distinctive Indian connections going back several centuries." These shared cultural links have created distinctive Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim traditions in South-east Asia that have

A WORD

A DAY

[E]QUIPOISE
 NOUN

Balance of forces or interests.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	31 Termite's kin	9 Serpent's victim
1 City of northern Italy	32 Rent out	10 Comfy room
6 Made cookies	33 Pre-euro coin	16 Cooling periods
11 Per annum	35 Floor squares	17 Banded quartz
12 Martini garnish	38 Copter part	18 "House-boat" star
13 TV's Philbin	41 O'Connor's successor	20 Tears up
14 Mayflower name	42 "Skyfall" singer	21 Peace goddess
15 Anxious	43 Censor's sound	22 Useful skill
17 Maximum amount	44 Finishes last	24 Malleable metal
19 Bolt's partner		25 Remote
20 Farrow of films		27 Sideways pass
23 Fight	DOWN	31 Fable fellow
25 Trappers' wares	1 Birdie beater	33 Tennis star
26 Utters clearly	2 Supporters' vote	Sampras
28 Freshman, usually	3 Govers's	34 Commotion
29 Leather-neck	4 Primary	35 Keyboard key
30 Print units	5 Deadly element	36 Suffering
	6 Crow	37 Tall tale
	7 Friend	39 Flamenco cry
	8 Nanny's child	40 In medias —

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

THIS IS THE WORST PIECE OF FRENCH TOAST I'VE EVER HAD!

OOPS! SORRY

GREG+ MORT WALKER

THAT'S MY SPONGE!

9-15

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

HAMMIE, GET THOSE DIRTY SOCKS OFF THE FLOOR.

THE RULES AROUND HERE ARE SO RANDOM.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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