

BRITAIN'S UN-COMMONWEALTH?



KAUTILYAN KRONICLES

IMTIAZ A HUSSAIN

THE British Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (BCHOGM) unfolding in London this week faces some underlying questions: What is it that binds 53 disparate members? How does it blend into 21st Century international relations? Why is it important?

Though its origin can be traced back to the 1887 Colonial Conference, which transformed into the Imperial Conference twenty years later and the Commonwealth Prime Minister Conference from 1944, today's BCHOGM body was distinctively shaped by establishing the Commonwealth Secretariat in 1965, also in London. Just that informs us plenty: it converted colonial appendages (and the asymmetrical participation that comes with it) into a more democratised playground, which, from 1971, began rotating, every two years, to different capitals (where once the British imperial sun "would never set"), for a summit. London was chosen irregularly this year as Vanuatu, the expected 2017 host, was pummeled by Cyclone Pam.

Here we learn a lot of the strengths, weaknesses, and prospects of this quivering institution that refuses to say "sayonara". Every host chooses the theme, dictating the proceedings just as London's "towards a common future" this year directs discussions to expanding trade, security-based cooperation, fairness through democracy, and climate-change sustainability. Not surprisingly, the original 1971 Singapore Declaration also played on peace and free-trade principles. Though this approach was only expected from a group whose members were former colonies, colonial backlashes also intruded the august company: disagreement between Margaret Thatcher's resolute reluctance to sanction apartheid faced an even more resolute mandate to punish apartheid-instigating policymakers. When in 1991, the Harare Declaration finally institutionalised the Commonwealth's anti-apartheid position, internal differences took over, leading Robert Mugabe, who had just successfully converted



Pedestrians walk underneath flags of Commonwealth countries flying from flag poles along the Mall leading to Buckingham Palace in central London on April 15, 2018.

PHOTO: BEN STANSALL/AFP

Ian Smith's racist Rhodesia, into Zimbabwe, to permanently withdraw in 2003. Earlier, in 1995, Nigeria was briefly suspended for a specific human-rights violation, while Fiji and Pakistan also lost membership briefly for threatening democracy.

One might ask what is the BCHOGM value-added, since the same themes riddle other international groupings? Similarly, how can any BCHOGM magic spread beyond the members?

Membership grew to 53, representing one-third of the world's population, but as BBC's Kamal Ahmed notes, many members have a more thriving trade relationship with other countries than among themselves ("Can the Commonwealth be good for post-Brexit Britain?", April 16). Commonwealth members have tripled trade relations with the European Union just in this century when

those with Britain have stalled or stagnated, while China trades eight-times more with those members today than earlier. It is not that Great Britain is being ostracised by its former colonies for sour memories; there is a lot more happening globally that Britain alone, like each and every other country, cannot control or account for.

Nowhere else can the implications of that resonate more than with the 2016 Brexit vote. Snapping the European partnership does more to dissuade one string of Commonwealth members, led by India, from headquartering business operations in London, one of the world's pre-eminent financial centres, than in the larger European continent. There is, indeed, reluctance to feed Britain's renewed Commonwealth and globalised interest against the lingering consideration that the very sentiment behind

pulling the Brexit trigger (populist outcry against European workers flooding Britain), was double-edged: it could easily be directed against other global flows entering Britain, including the more colourful Commonwealth member-state migrants.

Another BCHOGM group, former dominions Australia and Canada, may relish renewed British interest, even though global competition has reached such a level today that country-specific commercial anchors can only yield diminishing long-term returns. Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May presently needs something dramatically different, in the order of jump-starting higher thresholds of trade relations across the world, if not to demonstrate it has a far more viable Plan B than the European Union, than to simply compensate for its European partners in what might become a costly divorce.

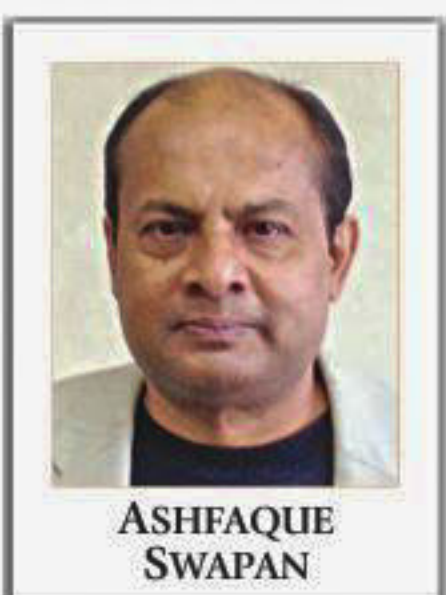
Matters are not much better elsewhere in the Commonwealth to sustain the Commonwealth spirit. Once the "crown-jewel" of the British Empire, South Asia is so divided today that getting India and Pakistan to work in harmony within the Commonwealth would divert more attention to South Asia than the Commonwealth. African countries have been so swept up by China that the Commonwealth may become, after Mugabe's nationalistically-driven withdrawal, but an afterthought, while Malaysia's corruption scandal in this election year exemplifies leaders in so many other Commonwealth members that confronting them, as the Commonwealth is obligated to do through its principles, may prove far costlier than Commonwealth abstention.

Nevertheless, the British Commonwealth carries a silver lining or two. Queen Elizabeth II tops them all. Gracefully symbolising the transition of a stiff upper-lipped imperious society into the "global commons" where countries look more like each other, perhaps even bond with each other more symmetrically, she has served as the Commonwealth's unwitting "Rock of Gibraltar" almost from her very coronation. As she retreats from her duties, though, she may be, also unwittingly, anticipating the Commonwealth's fate: Prince Charles is too unknown, though with due respect to him, he comes at the wrong time to galvanise a wrong lot, for a wrong agenda.

The future of the 21st Century is currently being written by too many individualistically driven countries for any "common" wealth to stand a chance; and even the die-hard supporters of collective action may just have their collaborative cups filled to the brim with other commitments and engagements to resuscitate a 19th Century relic for contemporary purposes. Unless the London BCHOGM gathering can pull off a coup in pushing some of the world's most cherished principles and urgent obligations, it too may face a climb too steep to undertake. Even if it did, any outcomes would be far more "global" for Commonwealth authorship, suggesting a transition that will constantly be knocking on this institution's door.

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Meeting Amar Mitra: The anguish of a complete Bengali author



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

AMAR Mitra's literary achievements are formidable. His works of fiction have won India's coveted Sahitya Akademi Award (for the novel *Dhrubaputra*) as well as West Bengal's Bankim Puraskar (for the novel *Ashuacharit*).

But you wouldn't be able to tell if you met the man. The diminutive, sexagenarian veteran fiction writer is disarmingly self-effacing in person, as I discovered when I met him at an Atlanta literary event in his honour hosted by Seba Bangla Library. His trip was sponsored by *Galpath* and *BoierHut.com*, two organisations devoted to Bangla literature. Born in Bangladesh's Satkhira, he moved to West Bengal in the 1950s when he was an infant. His mother's heart never quite left their birthplace, Mitra said. He spent his childhood listening to his homesick mother's sweet, sad, nostalgic reminiscences of the home they had to leave, the Kapotakha river made famous by Michael Madhusudan Dutt.

Many, many years later, when Mitra had an opportunity to visit his birthplace, he was overwhelmed with emotion. As he reconnected with a place he had left in childhood, he told attendees at Seba Bangla Library, he carried on an imaginary conversation with his mother. "This is it, *Maa*. I'm going to leave now. But I'm going to leave you behind. You stay here at your *baaper bari* (ancestral home)."

It was a deadpan, matter-of-fact descrip-



Award-winning author Amar Mitra reading a short story of his at a literary event held in his honour by Seba Bangla Library in Atlanta. SubhasreeNandy, who conducted the event, looks on.

PHOTO: ARSHAD SUMON

tion. Mitra spoke in a low monotone, with charming gentleness and humility, but his words packed a powerful emotional punch.

I, like the rest of the audience, sat stunned, deeply moved by the emotional power of the heart-rending anguish his remarks reflected.

This, then, is a microcosm of what the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent has wrought. We are aware of the terrible communal riots at that time. What tends to be ignored are the terrible fissures in the hearts of families and individuals left by the geographical divide.

Mitra has been writing for over five

decades. His body of work includes 30 published novels, a number of short-story collections as well as a number of books for children. Yet he is not quite done. Even now, he sits down to write each morning.

For his award-winning novel *Dhrubaputra*, he did considerable research, reading historical documents as well as brushing up on his Sanskrit. Set in Kalidasa's time several millennia ago in the Madhya Pradesh city of Ujjain, the novel is actually a rebuttal of the social-cultural environment described in Kalidasa's epic. The drought-ridden Ujjain threatened by misrule and rising autocracy is entirely the

product of Mitra's imagination, which was affected by the disquieting contemporary socio-political environment at the time of writing, Mitra acknowledged.

Later, Mitra read a short story of his published in Bangladesh's *Kali O Kolom*, and his abiding sympathy for the vulnerable ordinary human being, caught in the awful socio-political environment of vicious antagonisms, became evident.

Mitra continues a distinguished tradition championed by some of the most renowned exponents in Bengali literature. That is why I consider him, like them, to be a complete Bengali writer. What I mean is that he is an author whose work embraces the region in all its diversity and transcends the terrible Hindu-Muslim divide that has bedevilled it. Like literary forbears Kazi Nazrul Islam, Sunil Gangopadhyay and Hasan Azizul Huq, his worldview is a plural, inclusive one. Perhaps not entirely coincidentally, Gangopadhyay and Huq, like Mitra, have personally experienced the trauma of exile. There are other distinguished writers who were exiled after partition, yet never wavered from their deep, abiding faith in a humane, inclusive Bengali identity—Muzaffar Ahmed, originally from Bangladesh's Sandwip, founder of the West Bengal's CPM, economist Ashok Mitra and historian Tapan Ray Choudhury of West Bengal, literary scholar Anisuzzaman of Bangladesh.

We live during a particularly distraught age, when divisions—racial, ethnic, religious, you name it—seem to be tearing apart human societies. The rise of ethno-nationalism and sectarian chauvinism is

darkening the political horizon all over the world.

The trauma of the 1947 partition also left enormous bitterness and pain in its wake. Yet all the writers I mention, including Mitra, not only transcended it, but embraced a humane, inclusive ethos that gives me enormous comfort as I consider today's fraught age.

During his lecture in Atlanta, Mitra said that he firmly believed that, in his words, "every Bangladeshi has a right to visit Rabinranath Tagore's Jorasanko mansion, and anyone from West Bengal has a right to visit Jibanananda Das' Barisal."

Mitra expressed his fond wish that people would rid themselves of sectarian enmities that continue to cause so much violence, pain and misery. In a short story, he ends with a deeply affecting fantasy: The protagonist wakes up to discover that human beings live in harmony and borders have disappeared.

Notwithstanding the pain and bitterness after having to leave his birthplace, Amar Mitra, it turns out, refuses to give up on his dream of a society where people, despite their differences, live in amity.

What a wondrous coda at a time when we seem to be sinking deeper and deeper into our vicious sectarian prejudices! *Amar-da*, weighed down as I am by cynical scepticism of the human race, I cannot say in all honesty that I feel terribly optimistic. But I salute you from the bottom of my heart for having the largeness of heart to continue to dream.

If you are right, and I am wrong, I'll be the happiest person on earth.

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

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



April 21, 1989

MASSIVE STUDENT MARCH ON BEIJING'S TIANANMEN SQUARE

Massive student march on Beijing's Tiananmen Square on the evening of the day, some 100,000 students marched on Tiananmen Square, ignoring orders from Beijing municipal authorities.

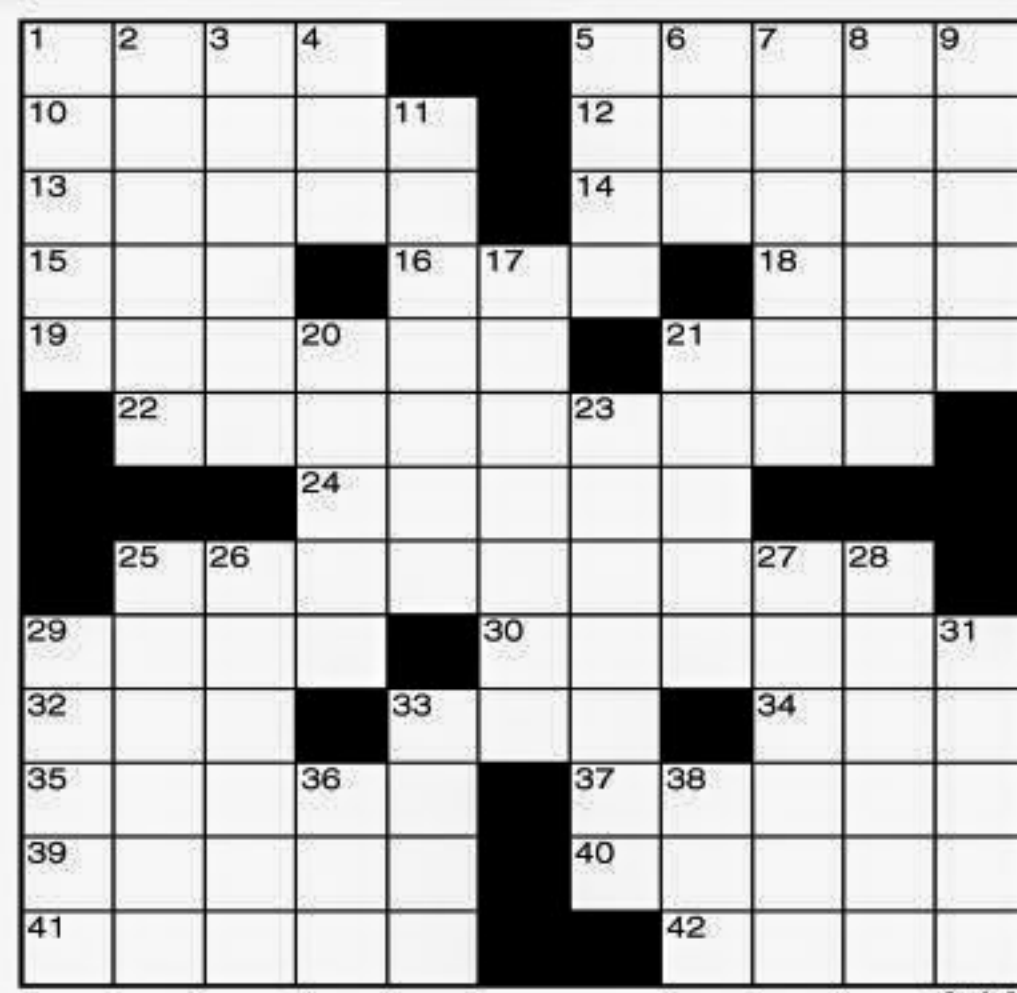
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Deep sleep
- 5 Parlor drinks
- 10 Leaves out
- 12 Stream swimmer
- 13 Make fresh
- 14 Home
- 15 Bulldog backer
- 16 Long time
- 18 Drill need
- 19 Lower in status
- 21 Plops down
- 22 Accountants consult them
- 24 March 14, to math fans
- 25 They hold services
- 29 Edict
- 30 Kansas City
- team
- 32 Treasury Dept.
- div.
- 33 Summer sign
- 34 Antique auto
- 35 Muhammad
- Ali's boxing daughter
- 37 California grider
- 39 Seat of County Clare
- 40 Martin of movies
- 41 Storms
- 42 Warring god
- Kenton
- 6 Planetoid
- 7 Rock's- Brothers
- 8 Book checks
- 9 Undoes a dele
- 11 Worry
- 17 If challenged
- 20 Yank living overseas
- 21 With craft
- 23 Simian subset
- 25 Albania's capital
- 26 Moving carefully
- 27 Salary recipient
- 28 Jacket part
- 29 1040 sender
- 33 Highlands girl
- 36 Recline
- 38 "Give-rest!"

DOWN

- 1 Hollowed out
- 2 Brunch dish
- 3 Low points
- 4 Had brunch
- 5 Bandleader



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

POPUP ROPES
 ARISE EVENT
 NINER CARTA
 EGG SURLIER
 LIP EGO ORE
 SNOB HOLDS
 NEW MOI
 AGNES UCLLA
 WIT BUM TAR
 ARALSOE A ADD
 ROBOT CABLE
 PULSE ALLEN
 STEER WIESE

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