

# Politics of culture

## PM Hasina's visit to West Bengal



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina speaks with PM Narendra Modi as West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee looks on, during the annual convocation of Visva Bharati University, in Birbhum, on May 25, 2018. PHOTO: PTI

**PALLAB BHATTACHARYA**

A country's foreign policy is often driven by the national imperatives of the party in power there. This was evident when Prime Ministers Narendra Modi, Sheikh Hasina and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee came together in Santiniketan on May 25. The very next day there was another convocation less than a 100km away where Sheikh Hasina was conferred an honorary D Litt degree by the Kazi Nazrul Islam University in Asansol.

Many analysts in India saw the Modi-Hasina meeting in Santiniketan as an informal summit of the same model as the Indian prime minister's boat rides with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin in recent weeks. There was no boat ride in Santiniketan, but the lush greenery and serenity of Visva Bharati University provided the backdrop of the Modi-Hasina meeting. Although neither India nor Bangladesh went on record officially to term it as an informal summit, the talks were held without a structured agenda or format, meaning the two leaders were free to discuss any issue they chose.

No doubt, soft-power diplomacy and the celebration of close bonds of shared cultural heritage of India and Bangladesh were the overriding motives at the two separate convocations where the three leaders pointed to Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh, being the emblems of cultural affinity that transcend the political boundaries of the two countries, a message that will resonate on both sides of Bengal.

However, a closer look would bring out the political undercurrents of the occasions. The Visva Bharati convocation was followed by a one-to-one meeting between the two prime ministers in Santiniketan for about an hour and after the Asansol convocation came an hour-long interaction between Hasina and Mamata in Kolkata.

For Sheikh Hasina, the visit to West Bengal was invested with more significance and a strong political statement for her constituency in Bangladesh in this election year. She used the opportunity to achieve mainly four objectives: first, to give a push to the pending issue of the Teesta river water-sharing deal hanging fire for the last seven years; second, to reach out to the international community on the issue of repatriation of Rohingya refugees, which has failed to take off even after five months of signing the deal with Myanmar; third, to dispel the perception among

Bangladesh's civil society of the ruling Awami League's rightist tilt; and fourth, to secure an iteration of India's support for her government.

Bangladesh goes to fresh general elections likely at the end of this year and Sheikh Hasina seeks a third consecutive five-year shot at power. She went ahead with her visit knowing well Mamata Banerjee's resistance to the Teesta treaty. She needed to be seen making another attempt to persuade the West Bengal chief minister to drop her opposition to the sharing of Teesta waters. There was no official word from either side whether the Teesta issue figured in the separate Hasina-Modi and Hasina-Mamata talks. But the expectation in Dhaka was that even signs of a forward movement from Mamata on the Teesta deal would have given some relief to Sheikh Hasina.

**Sheikh Hasina received wholehearted support from Modi who assured that India would extend all assistance to help realise her vision of Bangladesh as a developed country by the year 2041.**

The Rohingya repatriation has remained a sore patch in the Hasina government's foreign policy objectives. Even a start to the return of the refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar's Rakhine province can lend some success to Dhaka's diplomatic drive on this front. The Hasina government is under fire from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) for failing to secure the Teesta deal and ensure the Rohingyas' return.

Domestic politics in Bangladesh, particularly that concerning the coming elections, has often seen the Hasina dispensation to go soft on fundamentalist forces and make compromises with some Islamist groups as evidenced by the changes in school textbooks and the removal of a statue from High Court premises in Dhaka. It might have been a tactical move by the PM but it has created a sense of deep disquiet in the secular and

non-communal sections of Bangladesh's civil society. That disquiet was compounded by a number of attacks on Hindus, their shrines and properties and killing of secular writers. Sheikh Hasina has used her trip to Visva Bharati and Asansol to refurbish her government's image vis-à-vis religious minorities. And the best way to do this was to turn to the cultural tool, so appealing to the Bengali psyche. Sheikh Hasina's audience at Visva Bharati included a galaxy of cultural personalities from Bangladesh including national professor Anisuzzaman, writer Selina Hossain and singers Rezwana Choudhury Bannya, Lily Islam, Aditi Mohsin, Sharmila Banerjee and theatre personality Ramendu Majumdar, all of whom accompanied her on the trip.

In her D Litt acceptance speech in Asansol, Sheikh Hasina mentioned how Kazi Nazrul spread the messages of both Islam and Hinduism by writing Hamd and Naat and composing Shyama sangeet and Vaishnava songs. She intended to reassure the progressive civil society in Bangladesh by dispelling perceptions about her government's tilt towards the political right.

India-Bangladesh ties are at an all-time high with cooperation intensifying in existing and new areas including defence, nuclear and space technology in the last four years. Prime Minister Modi mentioned that the two countries have also solved issues related to their land and sea boundaries. India-Bangladesh relations are clearly the best achievements of Modi's "neighbourhood first" policy, which has lost some of its sheen following strains in ties with Pakistan, China, Nepal and the Maldives. Besides, Sheikh Hasina received wholehearted support from Modi who assured that India would extend all assistance to help realise her vision of Bangladesh as a developed country by the year 2041.

The message Mamata Banerjee wanted to send by agreeing to engage with Hasina in Kolkata was her willingness to do away with the popular perception of being a mercurial politician who refuses to see India's larger foreign policy matrix. This change, if sustained, could be in keeping with her ambitions to play a more active role in India's national politics as she is one of the prime movers of the opposition parties' efforts to put up a united front against the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent to The Daily Star.

# In deception we trust?



RUBANA HUQ

**I** loved Morgan Freeman. Somehow, that beard and that skin always used to give off a sincere feel. Having a penchant for films that address afterlife, watching Freeman has always been hugely entertaining. I remember a particular scene where it opens with a janitor wiping the floor, followed by the same man becoming an electrician coming down from the ladder and then, soon after, changing out of the working clothes. Suddenly, the Boss had appeared. And out came Morgan Freeman playing God in *Bruce Almighty* meeting Jim Carrey.

Morgan Freeman has always charmed his audience by his roles of reverence. His follow-up film *Evan Almighty* in 2007 also was a huge success. And then, with National Geographic, Freeman led us through different theological streams by featuring in *The Story of God*. But this time around, the 80-year-old Freeman, one of Hollywood's biggest stars, with an acting career of nearly 50 years, has finally been accused of abusing women. The fan in me was shattered. Ironically, it was only a year ago that Freeman had expressed his desire to play the devil and said it made perfect sense for him to switch from playing God to Satan as "They're both sides of the same coin." After hearing the detailed accounts of eight women who have suffered his abuse, I laughed at myself. How naïve could I have been in thinking that a man who plays God would be godly?

The world today is based on projected and alternate realities. A leader can be made and unmade by manufacturing data and manipulating consent. Hence, one ought not be surprised by dramatic overturns. Examples of Trump-like frauds running amok in apparent democracies all around the world are of no surprise to any of us anymore. And so, we all should exercise restraint when it comes to expectations relating to governance, anywhere around the globe.

Very recently, Pablo Iglesias, the Secretary-General of Spain's leftwing party Podemos, has been subjected to critique. He has been perceived to have betrayed his party by having joined the bourgeoisie. His 268-square-metre villa with a swimming pool outside Madrid has attracted a lot of criticism. Being the founder of a group of leftwing academics, Podemos entered the Spanish political scene in 2014 from the Indignados Movement. At a time when Spain was in recession and unemployment hit as high as 27 percent, Iglesias bagged 69 out of 350 seats in parliament, by leading Spain in the aftermath of the 15-M Movement protests against inequality and corruption. After all that promise of greatness, the image of the political scientist Pablo Iglesias' personal wealth did not sit well with the Spanish people and has left them wondering...

Speaking of high-profile disappointments, one cannot but refer to Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein. Weinstein is a man of many titles and accolades. He's the co-founder of Miramax and the co-chairman of The Weinstein Company. He's also an Oscar and Tony Award-winning producer. He has been hugely successful in keeping bad press away and very often his tales of transgressions never made headlines. Moreover, he also convinced the world of his grand narrative of being a liberal feminist who could raise enough money to support the campaign of the first aspiring woman president of the USA. Yet, Weinstein is currently facing allegations of decades of sexual harassment and was in

handcuffs only a few days ago.

Another story of a 34-year-old American entrepreneur taking the world by surprise must be mentioned for the sake of relevance of this piece. In the name of democratising healthcare, Elizabeth Holmes, through her company Theranos, valued at USD 9 billion, falsely claimed to have devised revolutionary blood tests using very small amounts of blood. Two years after *Forbes* named Holmes as the youngest self-made female billionaire in the world, she was accused of potentially misleading investors and the government about Theranos' blood-testing technology. Holmes became one of the "World's Most Disappointing Leaders" (*Fortune*) overnight and eventually, in March 2018, Holmes and Theranos were sued for fraudulently raising more than USD 700 million from investors through exaggerated claims. Unfortunately, earlier, the American people had pinned their hopes on this young woman to break stereotypes, wearing black turtleneck (just like Steve Jobs). Instead they watched her pitching a company tale based on falsehood and her myth evaporating into thin air.

At our end, we seem to be breeding similar disillusionments. The morning starts with at least one story in print narrating the pitiful state of the banks. And we routinely raise our eyebrows and think. In spite of all the big business houses with shining lights and fleet of fancy set-ups, why do we not see the volume of business increasing? The reality is, a few business houses have amassed huge wealth overnight with their debts being rescheduled in the banks for more than ten times over the last couple of years while a substantial

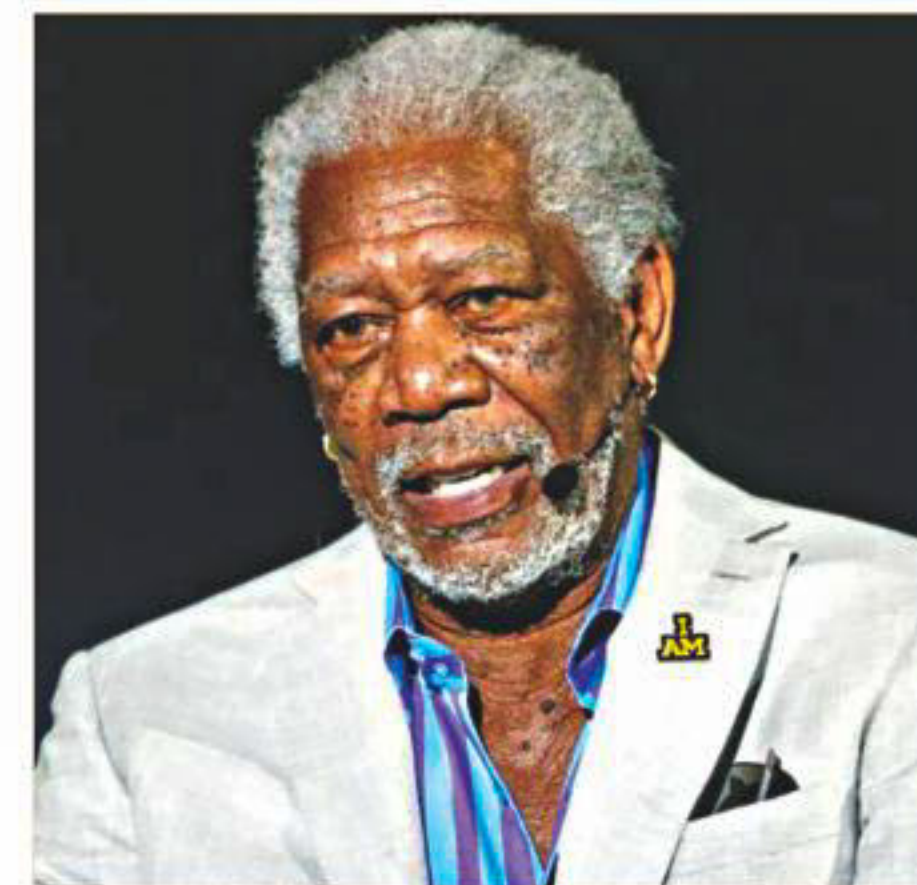


PHOTO: REUTERS/CARLO ALLEGRI

**Actor Morgan Freeman, the latest star to have been accused of sexual harassment.**

number of genuine, well-meaning entrepreneurs have failed to make any headway. While the light shines on these bubble business houses and they carry on with their glitz and glitter, neither do they reflect the real picture of our economy nor do they do the policymakers any good. (The scanty reference to the national scene may kindly be forgiven, considering the limited length of the column.)

However, if we remember: "Gilded tombs do worms enfold" (*The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare), we may then also realise that an apparent smooth green patch may not be necessarily grass and may actually be artificial turf. So it's best not to fall into traps that promise gold. They may very well be cheap aluminium, brush painted in gold. Projections and pitches don't mean a thing, as a virtual Aladdin may at best satisfy a juvenile fancy but cannot help or heal the ugly. Thus, let us all remember that transparency is crucial especially when governance is subjected to the ultimate test of the public. Magic wands won't usher miracles in, nor will disappearing inks erase any trace of shame.

Rubana Huq is the managing director of Mohammadi Group.

### A WORD A DAY

**CADENCE**  
NOUN

*A modulation or inflection of the voice.*

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	30 Like zebras	8 Thiamin or niacin
1 Pan of fiction	34 Feel queasy	9 Reykjavik's nation
6 Miles of music	35 Ump's cry	10 Runs in the buff
11 Wonderland	36 Egg cells	14 Utah national park
visitor	37 Kitchen gadget	19 Out of the wind
12 Decree	40 Game setting	22 Short skirt
13 Kitchen gadget	41 Get smart	23 Company thinker
15 Sense of self	42 Consumerist	24 European resort
16 Objective	Ralph	25 Gushed with pride
17 Pub drink	43 Categorises	26 Hman beings
18 Energetic people	DOWN	28 Ticket souvenir
20 Pasture cry	1 Lost colour	30 Sub system
21 Writer Deighton	2 Sad poem	31 Arctic
22 Fancy fur	3 Shakespeare's Athenian	32 Turn outward
23 Ticked off	4 Green prefix	33 Fixes socks
26 Looks after	5 Given a new title	38 Low bill
27 Seedy joint	6 Judges	39 Zodiac cat
28 Abel, to Adam	7 Spots on TV	
29 Abel's mother		

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### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A	C	H	E	S		P	I	T	T
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The Daily Star

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### Get Iftar offer updates in "Iftar Delights"

This Ramadan The Daily Star has launched a campaign titled "Iftar Delights" powered by Hungry Naki. The purpose of this campaign is to keep you updated about the lucrative Iftar deals offered by renowned restaurants such as Le Meridien Dhaka, Pan Pacific Sonargaon Dhaka, Burger King, Gloria Jean's Coffees, Secret Recipe, Italian Kitchen, Spicy Ramna Restaurant, Wok & Fire, Nando's and Peyala in Dhaka.

City Bank is also offering special deals this Ramadan.