


# Lessons in unity from Europe

**CYBERNAUTIC RUMINATIONS**  
  
**HABIBULLAH N KARIM**



As we moved upriver on a ferry along Krems, a tributary of the Danube, small villages with surrounding hillsides and cornfields fall away like picturesque view-cards. Somewhere between Germany and Austria, the landscape and vacationing crowds seem far, far from the cares of this world. It lulls me into a mental haze in between sleep and wakefulness when you can neither be in transcendental meditation nor psychedelic stupor. As I travelled through seven countries and more than a dozen cities/towns over 11 days, I am astonished by the homogeneity of civic amenities as if I were travelling through various contiguous states of the USA. Yes, there are differences in standard of living, in infrastructure, in attitude towards life, and most certainly, a past riddled with historical baggage of wars, oppression, inequity, and hegemonic domination and bullying of one country over another changing the political boundaries of these countries many times over the past thousand years. And yet, these countries came to realise that they had more in common than their differences, common traits of faith and culture that are more apparent to a foreigner like me travelling through these lands and finding that despite

obvious differences in wealth, these countries take pride in the fact that they are Europeans with a shared common market, common visa regime and a common currency. But Europe has always been a multiplicity of nations and cultures; no matter how obvious Europeans may appear as a broad ethnic group to an Asian or an African, European nations remained embroiled in internecine warfare and continually shifting political influence of various nations over the past millennium. But today, they are almost a single nation with fading political boundaries. As I moved through seven countries, spanning nearly two thousand miles, not once

did I need to bring out my passport or provide visa information to any government authority. This seems to bring out German philosopher Immanuel Kant's idea that perpetual peace could be secured through universal democracy and international cooperation. Under the surface of such congruous multi-national governance, the security forces remain fully alert, as can be seen from checkpoints along the highways where random checks on vehicles are made. But they remain committed to a shared prosperity and security as a region, and the sun does shine brighter and the moon dances mirthfully across the

firmament because of this cohesion. Such cohesion within and amongst nations can truly bear the "world as an oyster". But such prospects seem as remote as the daydreams of a beggar in the park when it comes to our part of the world. As we move into the country of Friedrich Nietzsche, I can't but think of his famous observation—"What can one do if power likes to walk on crooked legs?"—an aphorism that defines our fragile polity. Europeans and Middle-Easterners have travelled to South Asia in the Middle Ages in search of spices, wealth and Eastern wisdom. Now people from here travel to Europe in

search of wealth, Western knowledge and better living while we keep ourselves caged in fetters of politics and petty sentiments. When Europeans travel through the countries of South Asia, I am sure they are astonished by the novelty of our cultures and natural beauty, but at the same time, they also see the tell-tale signs that make us South Asians. Despite such common heritage and cultural roots, it's really mind-boggling that South Asian political boundaries remain as sharp as knife-points all too ready to cut anyone to pieces for traversing across them. Devise what you will: SAARC, BIMSTEC, BBIN—and still

we remain afar. While regional cooperation is flourishing in Europe and even in South-East Asia, regional initiatives in our neck of the woods seem to founder time and time again even though the yoke of European colonial servitude has been removed more than 70 years ago. Now it is only us that are in the way of our working together for our greater good. Of course, the cognoscenti will tell you, "Oh, we have religions that divide us, languages that build walls around us, and ethnicities that have vastly different DNA signatures." And despite these differences, one does not need to dig deep to find common threads in our religious customs, common roots in Aryan-Dravidian languages and common ancestors to our ethnic diversities—common South Asian traits that are as obvious to a European tourist as common European traits are obvious to a South Asian tourist in Europe. As the poet-philosopher Lalonde says, "If only I knew 'me', all riddles would be solved!" Twenty-five hundred years ago, a European philosopher, Socrates, echoed the same sentiment: "Know thyself." When we submit ourselves to such introspection, only then may we overcome our differences and rise above the artificial barriers that bind us and prevent us from taking off as a prosperous region befitting our shared history. Habibullah N Karim is an author, policy activist, investor and serial entrepreneur. He is a founder and former president of BASIS and founder/CEO of Technohaven Company Ltd. Email: hnkaram@gmail.com

## Something to reflect upon

**SHIFTING IMAGES**  
  
**MILLIA ALI**

TODAY, I choose to address an issue that has generated years of soul-searching resulting in an inner struggle to draw the line between right and wrong. The

introspection relates to the pervading global culture of nepotism and cronyism that has not only acquired endemic proportions, but also is unabashedly defended by many. The principal argument made in its favour is that "mutually lucrative alliances" between governments and vested interests actually benefit the public, in the long run. This logic seems to serve as the rationale for the thriving lobbyist culture in the United States. But the recent shocking revelations and indictments of Trump aides Paul Manafort and Michael Cohen have shaken the foundations of this pernicious practice. Ironically, these much-publicised court cases also belie the general impression that nepotism is more common in developing countries, where power is concentrated amongst the ruling class. While grand corruption is a worthwhile topic for an entire op-ed, my story is more personal and related to a deeper issue of how power-based relationships affect the day-to-day lives of the common folk.

What concerns me most is the way the upper class, especially in our part of the world, use their social status and connections not just for businesses and high-profile positions, but in almost all facets of their daily lives. What concerns me most is the way the upper class, especially in our part of the world, use their social status and connections not just for businesses and high-profile positions, but in almost all facets of their daily lives. For example, they routinely jump queues, break traffic rules, and muscle or bribe their way to

gain favours in public offices. The impunity attached to such actions sends a strong negative signal to those who wish to adhere to civic etiquette and the rule of law. In short, this prevailing culture of cronyism exacerbates the disempowerment of the common person and seriously undermines the rule of law. Recently, I was subjected to a situation that left me quite dejected

and puzzled. I was "invited" to a Rahat Fateh Ali musical event organised by an embassy in Washington. A friend and I arrived an hour and a half before the performance to obtain decent seats. After passing through two checks for invitation cards, we were asked to queue at the entrance to the theatre. Gradually, the crowd thickened and

people got restless. I noticed some making frantic phone calls to the embassy officials that they knew. Meanwhile, "favoured" invitees were escorted up. We were informed that they were the Ambassador's "special guests". I wondered whose guest I was... since my invitation was from no less than the Ambassador. Being good Samaritans, my friend and I waited in the queue with a few other people.

sometimes turn out to be foolhardy character traits, especially when one is not too familiar with situations where only connections pay off! When we were finally asked to proceed into the theatre, there were no seats, just a few empty rows for VIPs and others "taken by proxy" with the aid of handbags and scarves! There was no choice but to head back home since standing through the

it that makes people behave differently when they are in an environment where throwing one's weight yields positive results? Why is it that some South Asians invariably seek special treatment, even for trifling gains? Most of the guests at the embassy were US residents and fully aware that waiting one's turn is an important aspect of the civic culture here. Yet, they were shoving, shouting, and with no respect for elderly people (which by the way is often flaunted as an Eastern value). When someone heading inside was asked why he was being allowed in while others waited, he promptly retorted: "Because I have a position!" I suppose a brazen declaration of privilege is the surest way to establish one's superiority in our society! As I mentioned, I was "dejected and puzzled"—because all at stake was an entertaining evening, at no monetary cost. It was not a make-or-break situation. Most people could afford to buy a ticket to Rahat's concert at a local theatre the following evening. Then what was it that triggered the chaos and back-door cronyism? Was it a matter of prestige, power trip, or elitist satisfaction to enjoy a privileged status? Or all of the foregoing? Why is it that most tend to naturally follow basic day-to-day civic rules, even when they are not monitored? Part of it may be social pressure, but I presume a large part is also because they have learnt that following a set of rules is ultimately more beneficial for the society at large. A few days later, I heard someone comment at a social gathering that the Rahat performance was spiritually uplifting since he sang "religious qawwalis". I guess we need to be educated on this new form of "spiritualism."

performance was not an option for me. This story is not unique as most of you may have faced similar situations. But a few things stand out. I was shocked that this happened in the United States where the same crowd waits patiently for the doors of the Kennedy Center to open. This "favoured" lot also readily lines up for checking out at a grocery store. What is

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After more than an hour of standing at the front of the line, I noticed that there were not many people left behind us and the known faces had somehow melted away. Soon I realised that they had found an "appropriate" contact and were ushered into the auditorium through a rear entrance. You may be wondering why we still waited. Well, hope and patience



**QUOTABLE Quote**



**DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD**  
 (1905-1961)  
 Swedish economist and diplomat

*We are not permitted to choose the frame of our destiny. But what we put into it is ours.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Throw out
- 6 Fan's favorite
- 10 Make addresses
- 11 Snake's poison
- 13 Bottled buy
- 14 Fill with wonder
- 15 Twisty turn
- 16 -- Quentin
- 18 Author Deighton
- 19 New England state
- 22 "Tasty!"
- 23 Spur on
- 24 Plows
- 27 Heavy spears
- 28 Dava's piece
- 29 Droop
- 30 New England state
- 35 Lowest die roll
- 36 Ventilate
- 37 Pub brew
- 38 Wherewithal
- 40 Chilled
- 42 Bicker
- 43 Sophia of "Two Women"
- 44 Jazz club units
- 45 Tale

**DOWN**

- 1 Farmer, at times
- 2 Computer problem
- 3 Dustin's "Midnight Cowboy" role
- 4 Had a meal
- 5 Medusa's killer
- 6 Lend and others
- 7 Rep.'s rival
- 8 Just for fun
- 9 Cough drop
- 12 Pop singer Shawn
- 17 Objective
- 20 "Blowin' in the Wind" singer
- 21 Mario's video game brother
- 24 Washington city
- 25 Laundry staffers
- 26 Ancestry
- 27 Makes rounds
- 29 Sch. subj.
- 31 Moves slowly
- 32 Egypt's capital
- 33 Peptic problem
- 34 Minuscule
- 39 Squirrel's treat
- 41 Undoing word

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

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**BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER**

WHAT'S MY TROUBLE, DOCTOR?  
 YOU'RE JUST GETTING TO BE A GEEZER  
 WHAT'S A GEEZER?  
 A GEEZER IS A GEYSER THAT DOESN'T GUSH ANYMORE

**BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

GAAAAAH!  
 WHOEVER RAIDED MY SPECIAL CANDY STASH WILL BE GROUNDED FOR LIFE!  
 QUICK! DOES MY BREATH SMELL LIKE CHOCOLATE?  
 YOU CAN'T PAY ME ENOUGH TO FIND OUT.