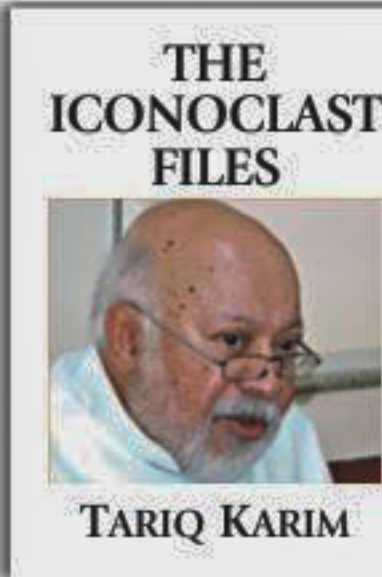


Reviving the Bengal Presidency template of connectivity

Regional prosperity sans the colonial baggage



TARIQ KARIM

THE ICONOCLAST FILES

THE historical-civilisational Indian sub-continent, now known as "South Asia", was for millennia the most integrated region in the world. Today, it is the least integrated. The post-colonial "neo-Westphalian" nation states in 20th-century South Asia that emerged at independence from British colonial rule in 1947 have remained largely hostage since then to the "Partition Syndrome", triggered by the colossal centrifugal forces set in motion during British colonial rule. Having self-amputated themselves asunder, these new sovereign entities were prone to overzealously assert their respective newfound national identities, vis-à-vis the recently defined "other", by deepening the divide and broadening the chasm that now separated them.

The newly created borders that separated, and defined, their newly defined sovereign territorial spaces also progressively and effectively restricted free movement of people and goods across their hitherto integrated geographical space. By the mid-1960s, the new ruling dispensations had physically severed road, rail and river routes that had for long served as an organically integrated circulatory system of communication for them, most severely to the detriment of the part of the sub-continent that was known as the Bengal Presidency under British colonial rule.

The Bengal Presidency was the largest of the colonial administrative divisions of British India with its seat in Calcutta (now Kolkata). At its territorial peak in the 19th century, it extended from the present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of Pakistan in the west to Burma and Penang and Singapore in the east. With the partition of Bengal in 1905, Dacca (now Dhaka) became the capital and Shillong the summer capital of the truncated province. With the reorganisation of Bengal in 1912, the Presidency had its core comprising mainly the provinces of United Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and undivided Assam.

The Bengal Presidency had the highest GDP and Shillong, the summer capital, reportedly boasted the highest per-capita GDP. Bernier, the 17th-century physician and traveller, in his annals of his travels, had described Bengal not only as the granary of the east, but also the common storehouse of cotton and silk, not of "Hindustan or the [British] Empire of the Great Mogol only, but of all the neighbouring kingdoms, and even of Europe." Notably, Bengal alone accounted for one-third of the total population of British India at that time, and yielded over one-third of the aggregate revenues of the Indian Empire.

A thriving shipbuilding industry had also existed and flourished since ancient times in Bengal. The Moroccan scholar and traveller Ibn Batuta wrote about his visit to Bengal in the 14th century where he "saw numerous boats in the river carrying men and merchandise and testified to the existence of gigantic fleet of war-boats." Chittagong was reputedly the centre of building ocean-going vessels. In the 17th century, the shipbuilding institutions of Chittagong are reported to have built a complete fleet of war-boats for the Sultan of Turkey. During the Mughal period,

Bengal is said to have taken the lead in building ships and boats. The Mughal naval force had many ships built at Chittagong. The British Navy also used warships built at Chittagong, at least one of which reportedly comprised Nelson's victorious fleet in the famous Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. During the first half of the 19th century, the shipyards at Chittagong built ships up to 1,000 DWT.

If trade and connectivity are handmaidens to each other with the latter actively promoting the exchange of ideas, goods and services, it follows axiomatically that disruption to this connectivity will translate into disruption of trade and people-to-people exchanges with deleterious consequences for all. After 1947, but most noxiously after the India-Pakistan war of 1965, land, rail and riverine connectivity was almost totally severed and remained hostage to negative politics of the Partition Syndrome until very recently. The first concrete and, for this sub-region, revolutionary breakthrough occurred when the BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal) sub-regional grouping, in early 2015, signed the BBIN-MVA. This seminally important

Regional connectivity, now under process of resuscitation within the BBIN sub-region, could well serve as the operationalising pathway to larger trans-regional connectivity, between South Asia and Southeast and East Asia.

document symbolises the beginning of the revival of the historic connectivity corridors that had existed prior to 1947, albeit only partially.

The best, most efficient and most optimum way forward in restoring connectivity is to adopt an organic approach. The BBIN sub-region (which could be likened today to being the rump core of the pre-Partition Bengal Presidency of British India) should consider reviving the connectivity in this sub-region which conforms best to the geomorphology of the terrain. Road, rail and riverine connectivity is best understood if analogously compared with the human body's superbly efficient circulatory system. The arteries, veins and capillaries have their own respective clearly defined function.

The British colonial rulers had fully understood this. In the larger alluvial plains and region, dominated as they are by the waters of the mighty eastern Himalayan rivers, and where even the hills are essentially soft alluvial foothills of the higher Himalayan range, trying to build highways conforming to international transportation standards and maintaining

them round-the-year have always posed a gigantic challenge. The monsoonal climate and geomorphology of terrain militated against these roads. Understanding well these challenges, the British put in place a superb organic system of communications, synergising the advantages offered by the rivers as primary arterial waterways, and augmenting their carrying capacity by building an efficient railway network linking with junctions that became hubs at major river points; while the roads comprised the capillaries that transported goods, services, peoples and ideas to and from the farthest nooks and crannies of the land to these river and railway hubs. The efficient use of such a synergised and organically meshed communication system is what made the Bengal Presidency the richest in British India.

In terms of fuel economy and carbon emission, river transportation is most economically efficient and environment-friendly. Tragically, following the 1965 war between India and Pakistan, the extensive river connectivity that had inseparably linked the peoples and lands of the erstwhile Bengal Presidency, now BBIN sub-region, was grievously disrupted. The abrupt severance of the water links that had inextricably and symbiotically bound them together transformed the north-eastern Indian states, as well as Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim, from having been integrally and historically water-linked and economically prosperous, into becoming landlocked and impoverished. With shipping services being stopped, the flourishing river economy that had made this part of the subcontinent so famously prosperous wilted away, with upstream and downstream industries disappearing.

This sub-region can best, and most efficiently, revive its old prosperity by reconnecting through their shared waterways that still connect them, inextricably and inescapably, political differences notwithstanding. Reviving the rivers, for connectivity as well as for restoring the river economy, must necessarily involve engaging proactively with the people who inhabit the countless villages, towns and cities that dot both banks of each of these rivers, and restore to them a sense of ownership and pride in their shared commons.

Regional connectivity, now under process of resuscitation within the BBIN sub-region, could well serve as the operationalising pathway to larger trans-regional connectivity, between South Asia and Southeast and East Asia. I envision the fledgling, still fragile, BBIN process eventually giving heft to the somnolent Bimstec, invigorating a still nascent Bay of Bengal community linked together symbiotically by the Bay that laps their shores. We could conceivably envision this sub-region, and beyond to the east, once more reclaiming its great reputation of prosperity that it had enjoyed as the Bengal Presidency, this time not for enriching the coffers of any foreign power coming from distant shores to colonise and extract for its own gain, but for the shared and greater prosperity of the peoples who are inhabitants of the region now. Without in any way surrendering their recently defined sovereign, independent national status, these entities would do well to reintegrate economically, ecologically and environmentally, for the greater and collective good of their respective peoples.

Tariq Karim is a former career diplomat and is currently a Visiting Fellow at BRAC University.



Miss World Bangladesh 2018.

PHOTO: ABDUS SALAM/PROTHOM ALO

To speak or not to SPEAK?



SHAHNEELA TASMIN SHARMI

CURRENTLY, the trending topic is the Miss Bangladesh 2018 fiasco—both the judges and contestants have been shamed by people on social media for their ignorance of the English language. The contestants and judges got "trolled"

incessantly on social media and many enterprises swooped on the offer to utilise it for marketing purposes. All this because the parties involved had a poor grasp over the English language.

Laugh as we may, but one cannot forget that English is a foreign language in Bangladesh. Our knowledge of reading and the written language develops from schooling, but the idea of spoken language mostly develops through our exposure to western media. Millennials, or even people from Gen X, are more acquainted with series like GOT or F.R.I.E.N.D.S. However, how many successfully understood the cultural innuendos used in those shows?

Chances are many of you did, but that does not mean the rest of the people did, too. And it is not their fault.

Take, for instance, the use of "goodnight" by one of the judges in the controversial beauty pageant. To the best of her knowledge, she thought the use of "goodnight" is correct due to its semantic meaning (it was night, after all) but pragmatically speaking, its usage is deemed incorrect unless you are trying to bid somebody farewell. Even if you know the correct usage of the terms from elsewhere, chances are very slim that you got to know it from school.

Think back to your school days, and you will remember that emphasis was placed neither on the listening nor on the speaking components of the language. With the latter, I am not only referring to pronunciation—rather, I am referring to the appropriate usage of words in accordance to a specific context. Now, there might be an escalating debate as to how schools following the Bengali curriculum are the only ones that do not focus on the spoken aspect of the language. Nonetheless, that is a myth. Not all English-medium schools promote or emphasise on the spoken aspect of the language (with the exception of a few).

I received a British curriculum-based schooling. When I went to England to pursue my Masters, I was quite confident about my speaking skills, since I felt that I had enough practice of the language and had a strong hold over it. Fast forward to my third day of Masters classes, one of my professors asked me "You alright?" in passing and I hurried back to him to answer his question and address his concern. It is then that I learnt that the expression "You alright?" is used as a form of greeting in that country. Since in Bangladesh we do not see much focus on the speaking aspect of the language, Bengali users of the English language

fail to comprehend these pragmatic issues that crop up with the usage of English in such contexts. In a country where no importance is placed on the communicative aspect of English to begin with, how can we expect its nationals to be proficient in that language?

In addition, it is not like university students in Bangladesh are any better when it comes to speaking. As a lecturer at North South University, I have often observed that even if I encourage students to use English as a source of communication in my classes, students with a poor grasp over the language feel too self-conscious to interact via English. In reality, by the time they start university, despite their increased knowledge in reading and writing, their spoken proficiency remains at a basic level and that knowledge becomes fossilised. Thus, they are too afraid to speak up because of the criticism they might receive. I have had students saying, "Miss, if I speak in English, my friends make fun of me!"

Our knowledge of reading and the written language develops from schooling, but the idea of spoken language mostly develops through our exposure to western media.

This anxiety of spoken English gets carried forward to their professional life as well. Any workplace would require you to have excellent communication skills in English, but as demonstrated earlier, how many schools in Bangladesh—or even in Dhaka—focus on English-speaking skills? Rather, this is one of the most common aspects of the language that gets overlooked for one reason or the other, as a result of which, users fail to learn or recognise the pragmatic usage of the language on a spoken basis. English, in Bangladesh, is still treated as a foreign language, although it is far more widespread and does not necessarily relate to its "foreign" status anymore. It is treated more like a second language—only unofficially.

Before we point fingers at Miss Bangladesh or laugh at a judge because of her incorrect usage of a word, we should realise that minimal focus on the communicative aspect of the English language in the educational system and unhelpful criticisms directed towards a person have contributed to the state that they are in today.

Shahneela Tasmin Sharmi is a lecturer in the Department of English and Modern Languages at North South University.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



"Bulgarians overrun the Ottoman positions à la bayonette," by the Czech painter Jaroslav Věšín.

OCTOBER 8, 1912

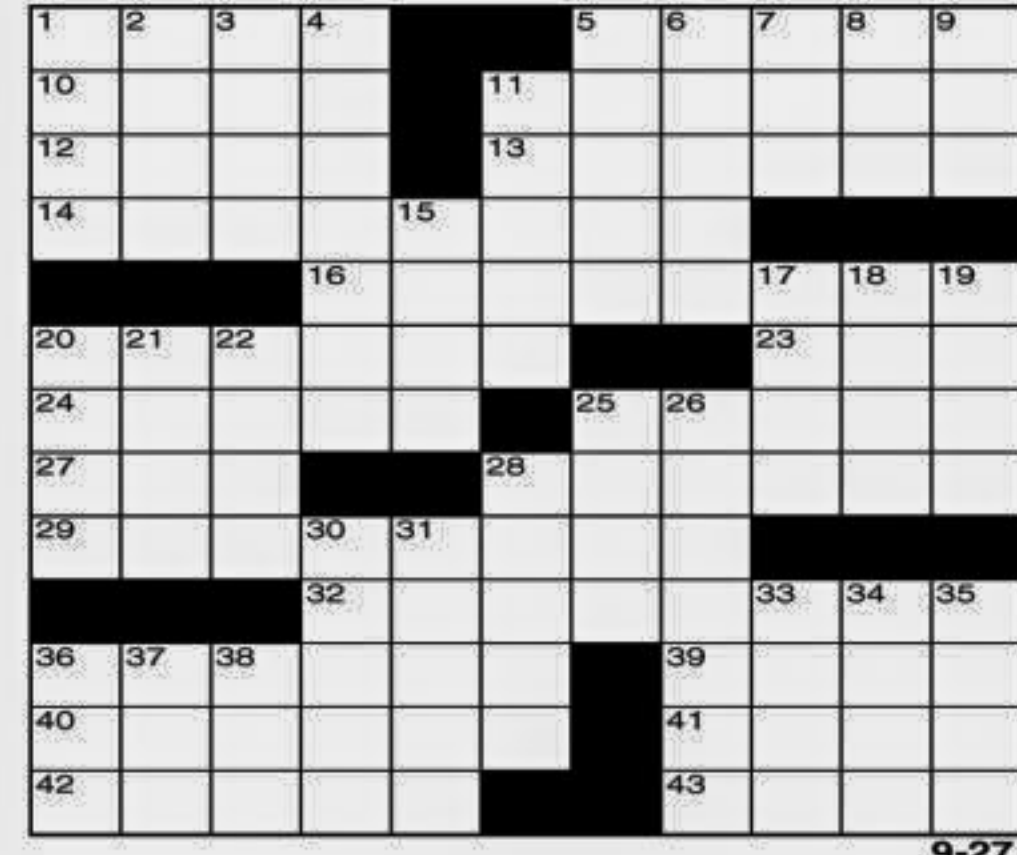
FIRST BALKAN WAR BEGINS

Montenegro started the conflict by declaring war on the Ottoman Empire. A few days later, Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia joined the war and created the Balkan League. The seven-month-long war ended with a decisive Balkan League victory.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Staff symbol
 - 5 "The Merry Widow" composer
 - 10 Irani coin
 - 11 Sober
 - 12 Gumbo base
 - 13 Followed
 - 14 Failed totally
 - 16 Shift-6 on a typewriter
 - 20 Igneous rock
 - 23 Fade out
 - 24 Not drowsy
 - 25 Flour factories
 - 27 Quarrel
 - 28 Diamond sides
 - 29 Major movie on a studio's schedule
 - 32 How a super may live
- DOWN**
- 1 Be boastful
 - 2 Similar
 - 3 Bring home
 - 4 Rail carrier
 - 5 Minimal amount
 - 6 Does paper work
 - 7 "2001" computer
 - 8 Stopped fasting
 - 9 Cardinal
 - 11 Publicity act
 - 15 Stiff drink
 - 17 Not active
- 18 Having a shiny coat
 - 19 Lawman Eliot
 - 20 Homer's son
 - 21 Soothing plant
 - 22 Put in stitches
 - 25 Brewer's need
 - 26 Northern sea sight
 - 28 Computer type choices
 - 30 Warble
 - 31 Flies and gnats
 - 33 Hindu hero
 - 34 Mideast ruler
 - 35 Diner chow
 - 36 Jay-Z specialty
 - 37 Sports drink suffix
 - 38 Pool need

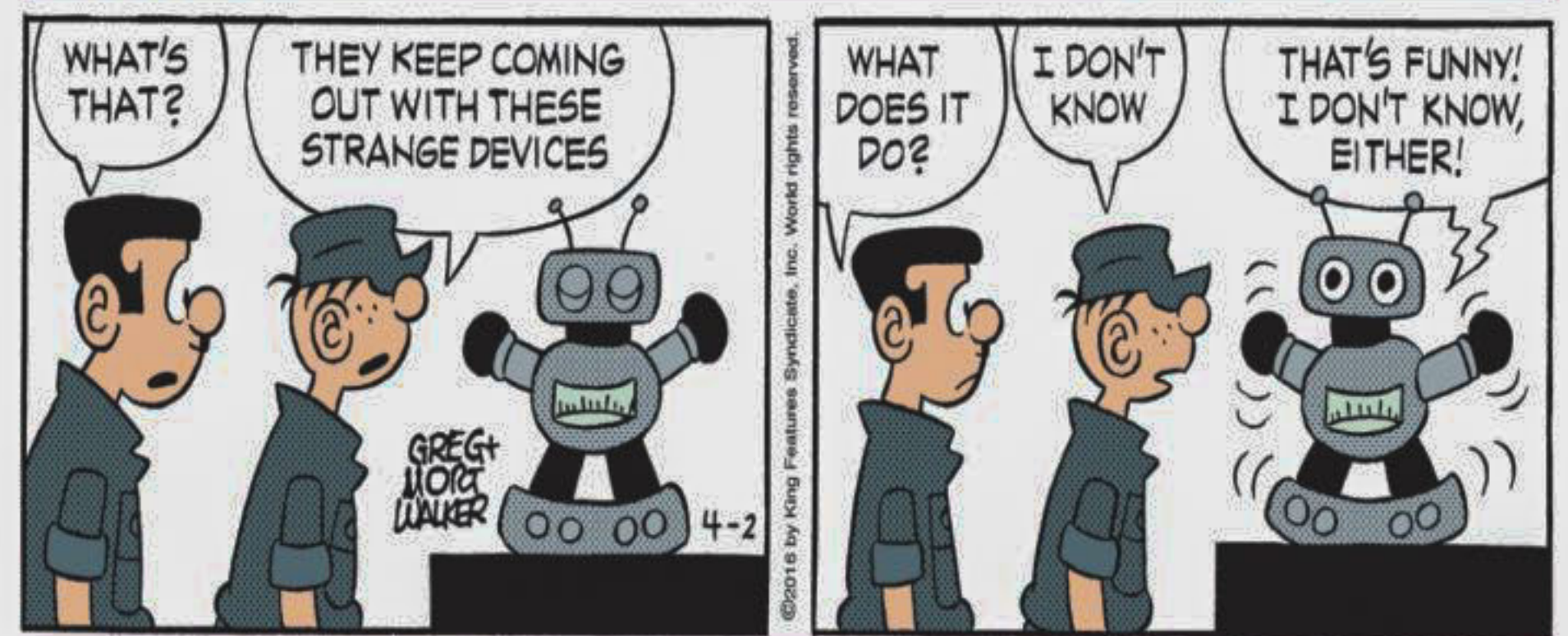
Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

CHEF RUDER IBIZA SET PROSPER TREES MET SIR PROUDER PROWLER RADIO AGENT TESS SKED MENLO OLIVE PROFFERERS USS ALTAR ODDER ELBOW SOLVE BEER

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

