

Will Brahmaputra and Barak rivers unite or divide Assam?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

FRESH unrest is simmering in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam over Prime Minister Narendra Modi government's move to give citizenship to "persecuted" religious minorities in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The move dates back to 2016 when the Modi government tabled in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, the Citizenship Amendment Bill to amend the Constitution for the purpose. It had run into stiff resistance from the Congress party-led opposition parties in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of parliament, where the BJP lacks majority on its own, following which it was referred to a joint parliamentary committee to examine the Bill and elicit the views of the people of Assam.

The Bill seeks to give citizenship to Hindus, Christians, Parsis, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs who came to India after facing religious "persecution" in the three countries mentioned above.

The immediate trigger for the latest round of unrest in Assam was provided by the visit of the committee to the state and its meetings there from October 22 to 25. Resenting the committee's visit, a 12-hour shutdown was enforced on October 23 by 46 outfits of ethnic people that paralysed normal life in all parts of the state barring Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj districts of Bangla-speaking people, most of whom have migrated from erstwhile East Pakistan and Bangladesh and are in majority in the Barak Valley region of Assam.

The warning by the BJP government in Assam to deduct the pay of those of its employees staying away from office on the strike day and its appeal to traders to keep open their businesses failed to stop the success of the shutdown. Not just that. Even the BJP's ally Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) broke ranks with its ruling coalition partner and backed the strike for political

compulsions because the party's main plank rests on opposition to migrants from Bangladesh irrespective of their religious identity.

The supporters of the strike argue that the Citizenship Amendment Bill militates against the tripartite Assam Accord of 1985 which ended six years of violent agitation on the "foreigners" issue in Assam led by All Assam Students' Union. They point out that Clause 6 of that Accord provides for a constitutional and administrative ground "to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of Assam" which they claim is threatened by the influx of people from Bangladesh.

The indigenous people of Assam fear that the influx of more people as legitimate citizens under the Citizenship Amendment Bill will further erode their numerical superiority in the state. According to one estimate quoting the 2011 census, the number of Bangla-speaking people in Assam has gone up from 21.67 percent in 1991 to 28.91 percent in 2011. On the other hand, the number of Assamese language-speakers came down from 57.81 percent to 48.38 percent during the corresponding period. It is these figures that the indigenous people of Assam are jittery about even though the Citizenship Amendment Bill is not Assam-centric and applies to the entirety of India.

The fear that more influx of non-Assamese people into Assam will upset the existing demography is what had driven the introduction of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) of 1951. The NRC is being updated and the December 31 deadline for the final NRC is drawing near, causing anxiety among the 4.7 million people of the state's population who were left out of the final draft NRC in July this year. The NRC and the Citizenship Amendment Bill have together underlined the ethnic rift in sharper focus dividing Assam between indigenous people in the Brahmaputra River Valley and the Barak valley.



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PHOTO: REUTERS

elections in five states and the parliamentary polls next year.

The dilemma for the BJP, and for the Congress party as well, has been about how to strike a balance between its concerns for majority indigenous people and its Hindutva plank. It has tried to do that through two separate sets of initiative—updating of the NRC and the Citizenship Amendment Bill. What is common between the two initiatives is that they seek to keep out certain sections of the people in terms of religious, social and

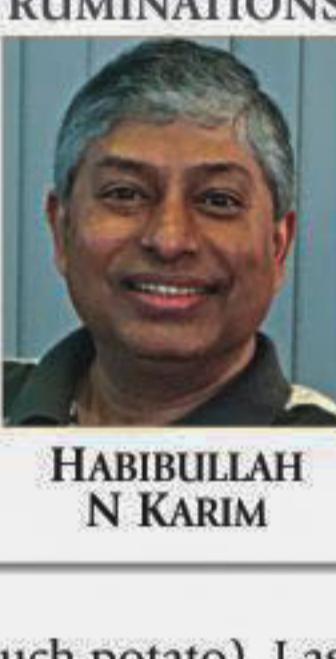
linguistic identities in a pluralistic country like India.

In this divisive time, one cannot but recall those immortal opening lines from a song by Assam's and India's cultural icon Bhupen Hazarika: "Ganga aamar maa, Padma aamar maa / O aamar dui chokhey dui joler dhara Meghna Jamuna."

So, will the Brahmaputra and the Barak unite Assam or divide it?

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent of The Daily Star.

Curse of the sedentary lifestyle



CYBERNAUTIC RUMINATIONS
HABIBULLAH N KARIM

SINCE my wife bought me a Fitbit Versa smartwatch to help me monitor my physical activity (spoiler alert: I am a proverbial couch potato), I astonished even myself as to how little bodily exertion I put myself through in a whole week which, in most weeks, amounts to fewer than a couple of thousand steps, whereas the daily recommended activity for an adult is to take 10,000 steps a day or 70,000 steps a week. In other words, I was failing the weekly recommended quota of exercise by a factor of 35. How more sedentary can one get? The answer will surprise you.

As I checked around, I found that most of my friends in the city get around a similar physical activity given our mostly desk-bound work and a lifestyle that simply makes us take a few steps to the lift lobby or walk a few feet to the car porch and that's about all. Even those who may not have access to chauffeured cars only have to yell "Rickshaw" or "CNG", or walk a few extra steps to bus stops. With our metabolism rate dropping to its minimum as we age

north of 40, even the slightest morsel of food we eat turns to stored fat. Such a lifestyle is not only a danger to one's physical well-being; it is also highly detrimental to the social fabric corroding productive engagement and worsening the incidence of debilitating diseases such as diabetes and depression.

Unfortunately for us city-dweller types, such sedentary lifestyle is contrary to our somatic design which craves corporeal activity and a good measure of sun on a daily basis. What

is even sadder is that we don't exercise not because of a lack of physical vigour, nor because we are physically challenged—we simply do not find the time to stretch our limbs and pump our hearts with blood infused with fresh air as we slavishly move to work and back home and spend up to 3 hours a day just on the road in the worst traffic in the world. But we can't blame the traffic alone for this malaise. Our work habits have become so atrocious that even when we go for off-campus retreats to

beach towns like Cox's Bazar, we don't find the time to even stroll on the beach!

Our exercise-averse culture has got so bad that when a doctor advises a patient to spend at least an hour a day on the treadmill, we find an Internet meme where the patient is sitting on a treadmill with a cold drink by his side.

In my case, I wanted to see if I was really so crippled or still capable of moving my not-so-overweight body around in the breeze. And a

mountain trek in the foothills of the Himalayas in the Kathmandu valley spanning 18 km in under 4 hours got my confidence back as my Fitbit Versa kept congratulating me for exceeding the daily quota of footfalls for the first time in many years. But back to the hustle of Dhaka, I was again folded like a limbless man.

An expat friend of mine found a solution that at least solved part of the problem—he never takes the lift or elevator or whatever you call that metal-box contraption that whisk you effortlessly to the top floors of buildings, and instead he always takes the stairs. Walking up 8 or 10 flights of stairs can be a challenge and outright dangerous for people with a heart condition but walking up even 3 or 4 floors from time to time will get your hearts racing for a little while, and that's far better than having no excitement in your daily routine at all.

Another modern-day implement that can turn the menace of a sedentary civilisation is changing our work habit altogether. Fans of the Iron Man film series are already familiar with what I am talking about here. If you have not noticed yet, then go back to any of the Iron Man films and you will see that Tony Stark always works standing up, with his AI-powered computers at his beck and call doing his work with hand gestures and holographic models of his engineering creations projected in

three dimensions around the workspace. In other words, he is always on his feet when he works.

Modern-day workplace researchers say that a standing work-desk is far more beneficial for your health and cerebral productivity than traditional sit-down desk-and-chair arrangements which atrophy our muscles and put our brains to sleep. A standing desk is simply a desk that is roughly a foot taller than a regular desk—sometimes flat and sometimes at a slight angle like a draftsman's desk—where you are comfortable working on your papers standing up. Standing desk sounds so counter-cultural that is, in fact, a revolutionary idea which doctors believe can reduce back problems, fatigue and fat-buildup in our urban exercise-starved lifestyle.

Another lifestyle hack is keeping a T-shirt and a pair of walking shoes in your backpack, getting off near a park on the way home from work, and walking in the park before reaching home every alternate day. Whether it is shirking the lift to take a few flights of stairs or introducing standing desks at work or walking home from work every once in a while, we must try to get some exercise to tackle our bulging waistlines and the constant threat of debilitating disease.

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: hnkrim@gmail.com



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



October 29, 2015

CHINA ANNOUNCES THE END OF ITS ONE-CHILD POLICY AFTER 35 YEARS

In 1980, China first introduced its one-child policy. The extremely controversial policy came to an end followed by a lengthy Communist Party summit, where the country's top leaders debated financial reforms and how to maintain growth defying concerns about the economy.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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