

Blue seismic ripples



DEPENDING on who you talk to, the US midterm elections resulted in either a blue wave of Democratic triumph or were a testament to the entrenched white nationalism, bigotry and jingoism of the American people. I would posit that both perceptions are correct.

Most Democrats would concede it was not the tsunami we were hoping for. I described it on a Facebook thread as a "seismic ripple" and that we had wider, deeper waters to traverse. Oceanic analogies aside, my first and somewhat myopic response was one of deep disappointment that the Democrats did not take Texas' governorship and that Obama's energetic stumping in Florida did not immediately convince voters to put their trust in young Andrew Gillum. Republican Ron DeSantis has won by the narrowest of margins even after insinuating that African American Gillum was a monkey. Too many Florida voters have proven that they are completely fine with 50s era racism—a time when a young black man such as Gillum would not have been allowed to drink from the same water fountain as a white person.

Voter suppression in Georgia, where the governor's race was intense and revelatory, has been proven rampant, moving the blue candidate, Stacey Abrams, to not concede and demanding either a recount or a runoff—a move that has given me and many other Democrats considerable relief and hope.

Verified reports of insufficient ballots, interminable waits and simply not having a socket to



29-year-old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez made history as the youngest woman ever elected to Congress.

PHOTO: MARIO TAMA/AFP

plug in electric voting booths have been pouring in. The race in Georgia was revelatory to me because the Republican candidate, Brian Kemp, has been brazen in his illegal voter suppression, with seemingly no concern that he has been outed. He purged 340,142 people from voting rosters, without their knowledge, stating they had moved when they hadn't. The most disturbing aspect of this is that he, as Georgia Secretary of State, orchestrated the labyrinthine set of voting laws himself, knowing it would prevent scores of people from casting ballots and he did it in the specific districts that would be more Democrat-leaning. He still appears confidently corrupt,

perhaps banking on the inherently racist bent of the white voters of his state to lead him to victory. Stacey Abrams' determined presence on the political scene has been a welcome addition and means the left is galvanising against the Trump administration.

Florida, Texas, Georgia are the bad news—the reaffirmation of the lower aspects of the national character. And the Republicans have the Senate, as expected, even flipping Democratic seats like the one in Indiana. An avowed white supremacist, Steve King, managed to retain his seat in Iowa. The voting trends of white, Republican women have proven that they don't mind misogynists and

rapists being elected to office as long as no one takes their stuff (read money), messes with their Bibles, or tampers with their blonde hair treatments. As reductive as that may sound, it has been my personal experience; they all fall into one of these three categories. It is either about money, Christian evangelism, or white supremacy. They have been amongst the biggest shocks and disappointments to me. It is a betrayal to my specific gender.

And now for the good news or strong evidence of a blue wave for those who subscribe entirely to the two-party system of traditional American politics: the Democrats finally took back the House. This is a big deal; this means Trump and co. will be held accountable for their manifold infractions, both moral and legal, and many of their odious policies such as repealing the Affordable Care Act will find no purchase. I would not have said this if the elected members of Congress were the same worn faces of a stuffy, yet cripplingly emotional, ivory tower party the Democrats once were. The newest elected officials are indicative of the actual face of America—diverse, energetic, young, and fierce.

Rashida Tlaib of Michigan and Ilhan Omar of Ohio are the first Muslim women to be elected to Congress, the former being Palestinian-American, something that would have been unheard of a mere decade ago. Sharice Davids, a Native American, and an openly gay candidate, has been elected to Congress in Kansas, the heartland of the United States.

More political firsts: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D, NY) and Abby Finkenauer (D, IO)—both 29 years old—are now the youngest women in Congress; Deb Haaland (D,

NM) became one of the first Native American women elected to Congress; Ayanna Pressley (D)—first black woman elected to Congress from Massachusetts; Iowa for the first time elected women as governor and House representatives—Kim Reynolds (D), Abby Finkenauer (D) and Cindy Axne (D); first Texas Latinas in Congress—Veronica Escobar (D) and Sylvia Garcia (D); Janet Mills (D) became Maine's first woman governor; Jared Polis (D, CO) became America's first openly gay governor.

This roster indicates a powerful, definitive response to the scourge of fascism gripping America. As one headline put it: "Muslim women respond to Muslim ban by running for Congress." As undeniably spirit-soaring as this is, I cannot assume that this will be sufficient to defeat Trump in 2020 and stave off white nationalism. This is a ripple, as I said, a powerful one, but it will garner an equally powerful reaction from those who follow Trump. Make no mistake, Trump's base is reminiscent of Nazi Germany circa 1937 and they will double down, intensifying their hate rhetoric and pushing draconian agendas when they can. This was driven home to me when I read numerous threads about Rashida Tlaib's victory; the amount of hate and Islamophobia spewed in her direction was chilling. The entrenched issues of bigotry, economic disparity and corruption at the highest level cannot be wished away only by voting. But I am hoping the new, fierce and diverse (and female) energies in Congress will inspire us to a revolution, which ironically means a radical reframing of the traditional political structure of which they are now a part.

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Reimagining the west bank of Dhaka



DESPITE the usual gloomy narratives, there are opportunities to transform Dhaka into a modern but ecologically attuned metropolis. The transformation can be carried out with our own resources, and our own imagination. Bangladesh's rising economy presents new possibilities but calls for new imagination. In the planning of our cities, conventionalised practices need to be reviewed and reframed.

The western area of Dhaka, along Turag River, holds the key to what Dhaka can become with its natural and constructed conditions. With its floodplains and wetlands that are still in a generous state, and despite the presence of an embankment, the western area is very much a hydraulic environment. Compared to the eastern part of Dhaka—Purbachal and areas east of it—where original wetlands, rice fields, undulating land forms, and forested areas have been completely destroyed to prop up the image of an ordinary city, the west still resonates with the living rhythm of wetlands and floodplains.

While we claim that the city of Dhaka arose on the banks of Buriganga, it is possible that a 21st-century city can emerge on the edge of the Turag, creating a west bank for the city.

Defined by the Turag river flowing down from north of Ashulia and heading towards the Buriganga further south, the western bank is formed by a slice of silted land between the river and the embankment. Rich with potential, this triple formation—river, embankment and banks—frames Uttara, Mirpur and Aminbazar on the city side of the embankment, and vast floodplains on the river side. Before it makes its slow descent south, the Turag splits eastward in Ashulia area to form the Tongi canal that flows further east to connect with river Balu. The rivers also flow across tracts of land splitting into numerous canals, channels and ponds to form an intricate network of water bodies and complex web of flows.

Such a dynamic landform has formed the very soul and substance of Dhaka region. Yet it is this land and water network that is being abused and destroyed by wanton landfilling and unplanned usage. Any planning policy or scheme that tries to bypass this fact about the soul of Dhaka is bound to be a folly, eventually compounding the problems of Dhaka in the name of doing something new.

Purbachal, idealised as the flagship urban development by the city authorities, and Bashundhara, the biggest private residential area in the city, both of which define our lopsided urban growth, rely on a brutal ecological change to a precious landscape. They advance the image of a modern city, but at what price? And what kind of a city is it? To the first question, we list: Thoughtless landfilling, changing ecologies, biotic destructions, more floods, rising urban temperatures, lower aquifer level, and more waterlogging.

And to the question "What kind of a city?" we see nothing more than plots and buildings. One would expect that an area of such magnitude would be designed by renowned and established designers, as was the case for Chandigarh, Islamabad or Putrajaya. That is not the case in Dhaka. Planned by anonymous planners in top offices of state agencies or real estate companies, the sites in Dhaka do not give evidence of a higher or newer understanding of planning cities, forming communities, dealing with an aquatic landscape, and making public spaces.

There is a stark difference between the two wings of Dhaka that were once similar, and now have become two separate narratives. While the eastern side represents massive geographic damage in the name of making cities, the west side still retains original aquatic conditions, and presents a new opportunity for making a city that could truly be modern and geographically attuned. *If planned well.*

Created following the floods of 1988 and 1998, the nearly 35km-long embankment is the most remarkable engineering presence on the western side. While various critical questions arise these days about the viability of embankments, the western embankment



Sketch for a water-side development.

COURTESY: KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

forms the fundamental reference for any major development on that side.

At the end of the day, all development activities on the edge of present-day Dhaka—east or west—are premised on how we deal with water as all urban peripheral terrains are wetlands, floodplains, agricultural land, and canal systems. Much of the ongoing pattern of land development in those peripheral areas ignores the hydrological realm. Recent propositions by various agencies promise a planning panacea for eastern Dhaka, with a development ethic that touts Pudong Shanghai and Singapore as models. Other than a glitzy image—and more landfilling—they offer little. Most importantly, such ideas are silent about either

the hydrological or public realm.

We imagine a different vision for western Dhaka: With over a 17km length stretching from Aminbazar-Gabtol to Tongi Bridge, the triple strip of river, embankment and riverbank offers a challenging but wonderful opportunity of forming a new river edge. It may be the thinnest, longest urban spine, but with calculated decisions can be Dhaka's longest and biggest public realm.

There are quite a few things the citizens of Dhaka lack, which pushes it to the lowest state of livable cities. One is a generous and vibrant public realm available for all. Keeping the stipulations of DAP in mind, the 17km-long strip can be the site of the longest public park with promenades, maidans, gardens,

fields, orchards, and festival grounds that the people of Dhaka can go to and enjoy. In certain nodal areas, cultural, recreational and athletic facilities can be constructed, all on stilts so that flood water can flow easily.

Besides the river, there are also wetlands and canals. Wetlands on the western side of the embankment are connected to the river, and those within the embankment are traces of an old system, now forming pockets (marked as "retention ponds" in DAP documents). Such wetland areas within the city can be used as retention ponds for tackling waterlogging, as a rich zone for biodiversity, and as a new kind of public park. Such new usages will be a lesson in benefiting from wetlands in a dense urban fabric, and providing for ecological security and sustainable development.

Another lack for Dhaka is social and group housing—the clustering of buildings that enable community formation. Such group housing can be aligned around the edge of wetlands creating an innovative environment in which residents can enjoy the magnificent view of a water landscape, while the lineup of buildings can form a protective edge for securing the wetlands. Such arrangements can balance building development with the enrichment of the landscape.

The existing embankment can host a new city-wide transport loop for the city, with a circular road and train (as already planned by the Railways). By developing Turag river as a new water-based transport connectivity, the western edge can be defined by new transport corridors linking road, river and rail.

For Dhaka's west bank, we imagine a new city pattern in which wetlands and canals will remain as they are but their edges defined by appropriate urban and architectural developments. The canal banks can be developed as a city that appreciates its water landscape and makes it part of a totally new urban experience. Not unlike Suzhou or Venice. The canals themselves can be a source of a new water-bus transport, perhaps linking with the Turag river corridor. With such a transformation, the western area can be Dhaka's crown development.

Kazi Khaleed Ashraf is an architect, and directs Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements.

QUOTABLE Quote

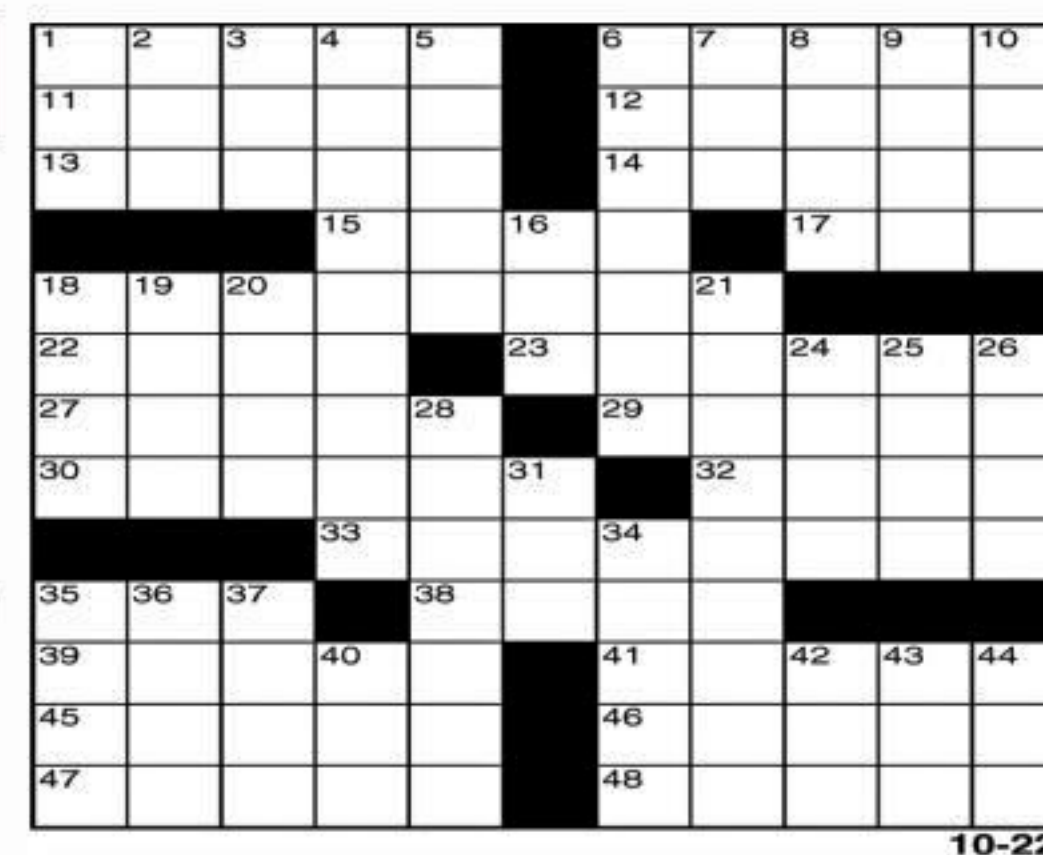


B. R. AMBEDKAR
(1891-1956)
Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer

Political tyranny is nothing compared to social tyranny and a reformer who defies society is a more courageous man than a politician who defies Government.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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 - 5 Prank
 - 6 Simulated
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 - 10 For fear that
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 - 18 Mix up
 - 19 Freshener scent
 - 20 Cincinnati team
 - 21 Abundance
 - 24 Destitute
 - 25 Land in the ocean
 - 26 Turner and Danson
 - 28 Learned
 - 31 Attempt
 - 34 Hardly wordy
 - 35 Passing crazes
 - 36 Oodles
 - 37 Turner of song
 - 40 Programming error
 - 42 Place
 - 43 Take advantage of
 - 44 Golf goal



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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C R I S P D E U C E
K O R E A G E T O N
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