

# What makes Dhaka so fascinating to the outsider?

*There is more to the city than meets the eye*

  
A resident of Dhaka may believe his city to be chaotic, dirty and overpopulated with rampant pollution and unbearable traffic. Not so to a visitor from outside, who is able to spot hidden gems in a city that an inhabitant would not normally notice. Although the city lacks good infrastructure and tourist attractions, is not geographically located in a convenient place to visit, nor has many airlines flying in, the underdog image is actually helpful. And Dhaka never fails to delight the outsider!

Everybody's favourite reason for visiting Bangladesh is its people. Almost everyone in Dhaka comes across as super friendly and goes out of the way to help a tourist. You are stopped on the street dozens of times every day, with many asking if you need help with anything. Traffic police step into the teeming traffic to help foreigners navigate busy thoroughfares. It seems as if the Bangladeshi people are as keen to get to know you as you are keen to get to know them. Because tourists in the city are fewer in number, the visitor has the city to himself and can explore bazaars, museums, river life, mansions and forts unimpeded by the foreign *hoi pollo*.

Another remarkable aspect about Dhaka is the complete contrast you get to see between the two neighbourhoods so close to each other. On one hand are the Gulshan and Banani areas, affluent residential neighbourhoods in Dhaka, now home to a number of the city's restaurants, shopping

centres, schools and members' clubs. Often described as posh, the neighbourhoods host a majority of embassies and high commissions in Dhaka. Squeaky clean, with well-regulated traffic, gawking at the high-rise buildings as you saunter around on the well-laid-out pavements, you could very well be in Singapore or Bangkok. Now traverse the roads near Lalbagh Kella, a 17th-century Mughal fort on the Buriganga River, you see narrow lanes, lined with richly decorated brick buildings, built during the late Mughal and colonial periods. Very little public transport infrastructure exists here making the ubiquitous cycle rickshaw the best option for getting around the rather chaotic and claustrophobic streets even though distances are fairly short; the striking heat makes walking a challenge. It is this complete contrast in the very same city that is unique and fascinating to the visitor.

The Ahsan Manzil is another of Dhaka's treasures. The official residential palace and seat of the Nawab of Dhaka, this building fascinates a visitor because of the garden house of Sheikh Enayet Ullah, the landlord of Jamalpur *pargana*, whose grave lies in the north-east corner of the palace yard. The charming Sheikh built his Rang Mahal and housed pretty girls from around the world and got them dressed in gorgeous dresses bejewelled with ornaments. The Mughal *faujdar* of Dhaka, having fallen for one of the beauties, invited the Sheikh to a party only to kill him while he returned home! His son subsequently sold the property to French traders and after going through various permutations and combinations, the Ahsan Manzil of today is one of the most significant



**A side view of the magnificent Ahsan Manzil, the former palace of the Nawabs of Dhaka. Nawab Khwaja Abdul Ghani built Ahsan Manzil in 1872 on the bank of the River Buriganga in Old Dhaka.**

PHOTO: DAVID STANLEY/FLICKR

architectural monuments of Bangladesh and a survivor of this sordid but fascinating saga.

Equally fascinating is Suhrawardy Udyan, where the national commemoration to the war of liberation is situated. This was where the instrument of surrender between the two armies was signed in December 1971 and East Pakistan became Bangladesh. To mark the spot, a 50-metre high tower of light, called the Swadhinata Stambha, composed of stacked glass panels, has been erected. This is surrounded by a water body which reflects the pillar. In the northern end of the park is

the Sikha Chirantan (the Eternal Flame) which symbolises freedom, and burns beneath the national flag of Bangladesh with the tower of light as a backdrop. A long terracotta mural runs along the entire length of the complex, depicting Bangladesh's struggle for independence. A plaque celebrates the historic speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in which he had declared that "the struggle this time is the struggle for independence." Recent Bangladeshi history is etched in the memorabilia and thoughtfully laid out for

the discerning visitor to fully understand contemporary Bangladesh.

Located in Dhamondi in Dhaka is the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum, the personal residence of the Founding Father and the first president of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. This was where some disgruntled army officers assassinated the Father of the Nation and his immediate family. Even decades later, the brutality of the violence is etched into the people's collective memory. The house stands quietly, shrouded with the memories of that gruesome and shocking night in August 1975. The family handed over the house to a trust that now runs the museum. Every visitor to this place is outraged at the brutality that happened here and desires to express solidarity with the people of Bangladesh.

While there are several scenic sights and tourist spots strewn across Dhaka, true wealth subsists in the unique contrasts dotting the city, reflecting the events that endorse vastly divergent periods ranging from Mughal to contemporary history and the serene memorial to Bangabandhu.

It is these gems that make a visit to Dhaka truly worthwhile. Even though present-day Dhaka barely ever escapes unflattering descriptions owing to its chaos and poverty, every visitor is delighted at his discovery of the hidden treasures of the city that he savours even while being treated as a distinguished guest.

Priyan R Naik is a Bengaluru-based freelance journalist whose articles often appear in the *Deccan Herald*, an Indian newspaper. He was in Dhaka recently on a short visit. His Twitter handle is @priyannaik.

## The never-ending wall stalemate

*Seeing through the toxic rhetoric behind illegal immigration in the US*

ZIAUS SHAMS CHOWDHURY

A nail-biting drama is unfolding over US President Donald Trump's inflexible demand for a wall on the US-Mexico border and the Democratic-led Congress's equally resolute refusal to give him the money. In an attempt to pressure the Congress, Mr Trump has refused to sign the expenditure proposal that the Congress put up, thus shutting down the government.

The issue has been in the daily limelight in global airwaves and media since the shutdown began over three weeks back on December 22, 2018. It is the third time that a shutdown has happened since Mr Trump became president and is the longest in US history. How the shutdown drama will end, whether it will end in a good way, which side will blink first, and how his stand will affect his 2020 reelection prospects are some questions that have emerged amidst the ongoing stalemate.

The Senate controlled by the Republicans has so far stood behind the president. There are some Republicans who think that Mr Trump is wrong. Whether or not more



**Migrants from Central American countries are seen near the US border in Playas de Tijuana, Mexico.**

PHOTO: AFP

the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has shown that drug smuggling across the border mostly occurs by driving cars through official border checkpoints.

Another thing to note is that the number of illegal immigrants in US has sharply dropped. In fiscal year 2017, 310,531 people were arrested for being in the country illegally, the lowest figure since 1971. Since 2008, the influx of illegal immigrants has steadily remained low.

A report in *The Guardian* published on January 15 ("What exactly is Trump's border wall and why does he want \$5.7bn for it?") has pointed out some enlightening revelations that provide a fresh perspective on some of Mr Trump's claims about the border issue. One point made is that Mr Trump's fear-mongering that there is an invasion taking place on the southern border by gangs of criminals is unsupported by facts. According to the Department of Homeland Security, in fiscal year 2017, 303,916 people were apprehended on the Mexican border. Of them, 13 percent were afraid of returning to their home country and were seeking asylum, a legitimate request. In the same year, more than 606,926 people entered the US by air or sea (not land), overstayed their visas and became illegals.

From the figures mentioned here, it can be seen that: (i) there are means other than the wall to check the inflow of illegal immigrants, and (ii) Mr Trump's administration wrongly, and perhaps purposely, makes a specious use of the term "illegal" to describe completely legal attempts to come to America. Far-right immigration opponents and senior Trump administration officials have been working to restrict the asylum process.

Republican senators will begin to reconsider their views, driven by their 2020 reelection calculus, is another question.

Each side has tried to win public support by arguing its case. Mr Trump, in his typical intimidating style, has tried to work up a crisis atmosphere. He has made inflammatory statements that America is being invaded by criminal gangs, drug dealers, rapists and so forth. He threatened to declare emergency and use his executive power to divert funds from other areas to build the wall. Warned by some of his advisers that imposing emergency will lead to court challenges on the grounds that he is abusing his power, and embroil him in more complications, he has desisted from such a course, at least so far. Some experts have also said that if Mr Trump uses executive power to push his agenda, it will create a dangerous precedent for a Democratic president in future to use the same authority to grab funds for pushing climate change agendas.

Mr Trump's contention that there is a humanitarian crisis on the southern border is a distortion of the real situation. He argues that the alleged crisis stems from "vast quantities of illegal drugs" and "vicious coyotes and ruthless gangs" prey on immigrant women and children in particular. Notably,

and not alarming. There are more illegals in America who, although did not enter the country illegally, later became illegals. The Democrats also believe that public sentiments are in their favour so that in a long battle of attrition, it is Mr Trump who will be in a more precarious position.

A CNN poll conducted by SRSS revealed some interesting figures, and could perhaps provide more clarity for the layman. According to the poll, 56 percent oppose the wall; 39 percent are in favour of it; 45 percent think there is a crisis; and 52 percent think there is no crisis. Moreover, Mr Trump's current approval rating stands at: 37 percent – approve, and 57 percent – disapprove. On the shutdown, 55 percent blame Mr Trump and 32 percent blame Democrats. The CNN poll also shows that public opinion on the wall runs on partisan lines. Nine out of 10 Democrats oppose the wall while eight out of 10 Republicans support the wall.

In order to contextualise the present shutdown, a brief look at the political background of the present tussle between Mr Trump and the Democrats in Congress is in order. Some analysts have pointed out quite cogently that when his team was crafting the campaign strategy for his 2016 presidential run, they came up with the theory that for a person like him who is not very comfortable with complex details or nuances of certain issues, it would be more sensible to identify some simple issues which could be pushed to mobilise his core support groups. A tough line on immigration was chosen as one such issue. And one of Mr Trump's campaign promises was to build a wall on the Mexican border to deter illegal immigrants. Now, for Mr Trump to be thwarted by the Democrats over this would be very humiliating. An ego-driven man, Mr Trump will not retreat easily.

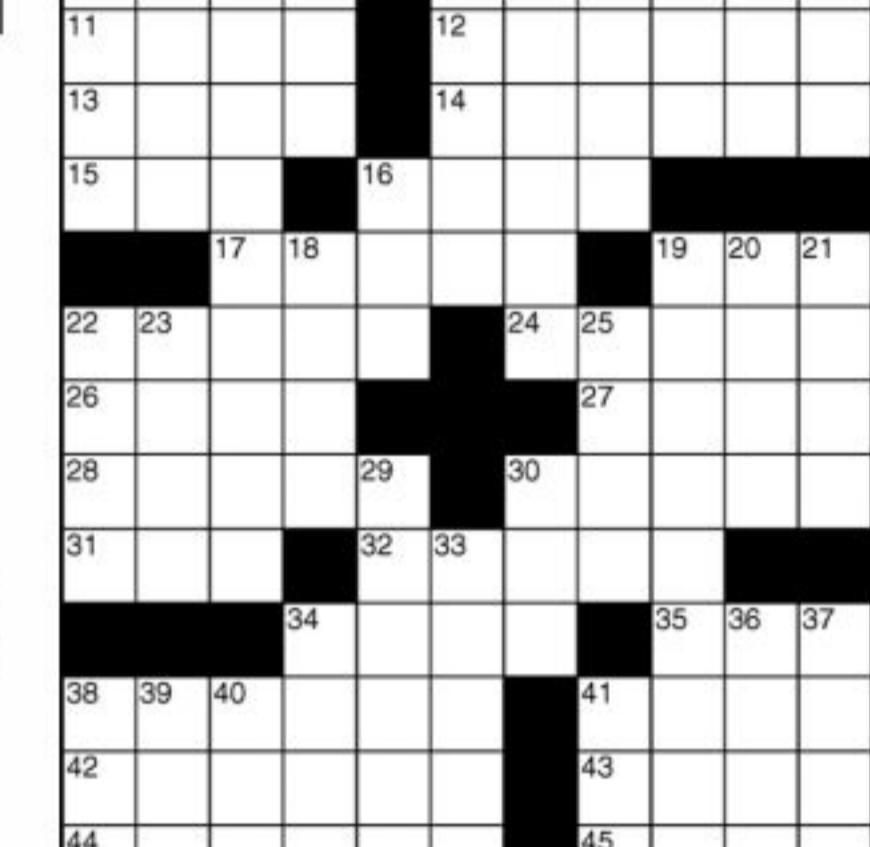
Mr Trump's method has been that when in crisis, make a bigger issue and create distraction to throw your adversaries off balance. But will that method work this time?

Ziaus Shams Chowdhury is a former ambassador.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	DOWN
1 Puerto --	1 Fissure
5 Romp	2 Inkling
11 Pop star	3 Soothing
12 Deep chasm	4 Lozenge
13 Hatfield-McCoy affair	5 Outmoded
14 For each	6 Rafting
15 Playground game	7 Tied up
16 Surrounded by	8 Metal waste
17 Chopped down	30 Daisy variety
21 Deep chasm	31 Easy victim
22 Hatfield-McCoy affair	32 33
23 Pop star	34 35
24 For each	36 37
25 Playground game	38 39
26 Surrounded by	40 41
27 Chopped down	42 43
28 Hatfield-McCoy affair	44 45
29 Pop star	46 47
30 Deep chasm	48 49
31 Hatfield-McCoy affair	50 51
32 Pop star	52 53
33 Deep chasm	54 55
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48 Deep chasm	84 85
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50 Pop star	88 89
51 Deep chasm	90 91
52 Hatfield-McCoy affair	92 93
53 Pop star	94 95
54 Deep chasm	96 97
55 Hatfield-McCoy affair	98 99
56 Pop star	100 101

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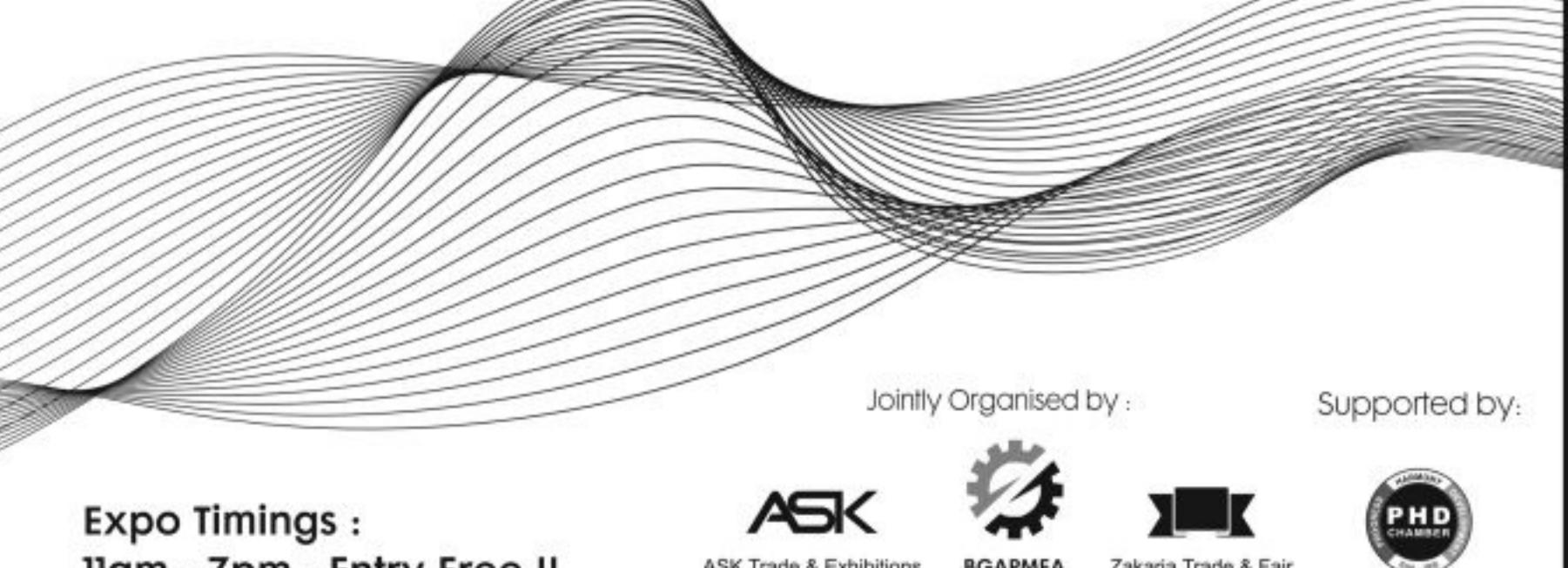
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