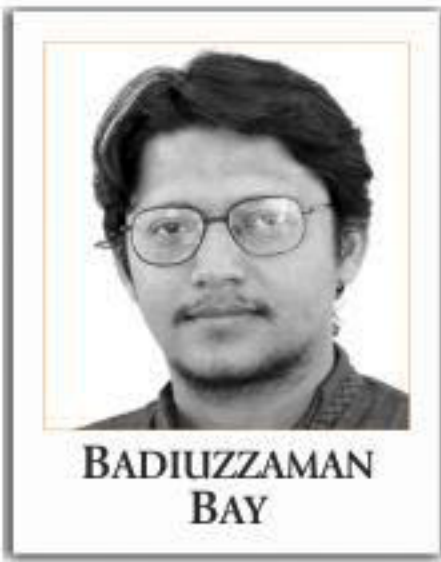


INDIAN NATIONAL ELECTION

Anti-immigrant rhetoric and its impact on Bangladesh



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

THE 2019 Indian general election, which will have its third round of polling today, is proving to be as challenging as predicted. With 900 million people eligible to vote and set to be held in a total of seven phases over six weeks, this election is being touted as the world's largest exercise in democracy and one of the most expensive. Yet messages coming out of this grand democratic experiment, especially for India's neighbours, are hardly uplifting as it marks an escalation of rhetoric that could be damaging to the South Asian dream for unity. Bangladesh, which has traditionally strong ties with India, has emerged as a polarising factor in the election. The propaganda value of issues such as security, immigration and religion is not lost on the far-right political parties in India, which makes Bangladesh, among other countries, easy pickings for their vitriol-filled campaigns. Prominent among these parties is the ruling BJP, which is desperate to recreate its 2014 magic. In 2014, the BJP won an outright majority of seats in parliament in a rare feat in India's fractious politics. At the heart of its election campaign was Narendra Modi's strident brand of Hindu nationalism which regards India as a nation defined by its majority faith—much like Israel or indeed Pakistan. Some have called it Modi's version of the two-nation theory, minus its political vision for partition. The 2019 election also saw the BJP ramp up its campaign against two of its favourite punching bags: India's Muslim minority and "illegal" Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants. Both are issues viewed with suspicion in Bangladesh. In India, although there are immigrants from different countries, the anti-immigrant rhetoric basically revolves around those from Bangladesh, more specifically the Muslims. At issue is their faith rather than their nationality. On April 11, in a thinly-veiled swipe at the Muslim immigrants, BJP President Amit Shah told supporters in West

Bengal that, if voted back to power, the BJP government would "pick up infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal." He referred to these immigrants as "termites", a description that he also used in September. But the government "won't send the Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians and Buddhists coming in from Bangladesh or Pakistan," he said, "because they are our brothers and they've come here because they've faced persecution in those countries." Shah's comments are nothing but a reflection of the BJP election manifesto, unveiled by Modi on April 8, which promised to ensure passage of the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) to give citizenship to religious minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan—in other words, non-Muslim immigrants. In the past, BJP has often suggested that Hindus in Muslim-majority Bangladesh are being harassed and pledged to shelter them in India. As accommodating as it sounds, it's a dangerous political game played at the expense of Bangladesh as it portrays the country as one unable or unwilling to look after its own minorities. But the thing that most affects the health of Indian politics is majoritarianism, which makes the rights of minorities secondary to the whims of the majority. In BJP-speak, it means that the Muslim population is no more than the sum of their votes which can be taken advantage of. That said, the Bangladeshi immigrant issue is both bane and boon for the BJP. The party has readily jumped on the anti-immigrant bandwagon considering its populist appeal, but then has been accused of communal politics as it included only Muslims in its definition of immigrants. Clearly, the BJP is playing the communal card to woo rightwing Hindu voters. This in turn gives its rivals an opportunity to appear more liberal. Interestingly, although Congress has sought to promote inclusivity with a strong dose of social welfare schemes in its election manifesto, its tryst with populism is well-documented. It's worth recalling what the writer-activist Arundhati Roy said about Congress doing by night what the BJP does by day. For example, since its win in the Madhya Pradesh Legislative Assembly election in

December, according to a report by *The Economist*, Congress has "outdone the BJP in cow protection, budgeting millions to build shelters for retired cattle." Congress President Rahul Gandhi's failure to stand up strongly for a secular India speaks of an ideological elasticity embedded in how the party functions. It also creates what we can call a "political blur"—in which the line traditionally drawn between political opposites gets blurred. We have witnessed a

citizenship is at risk. Although both India and Bangladesh have so far played down the threat of a possible deportation, all likely scenarios after a successful implementation of the NRC in its current form put Bangladesh at the receiving end of troubles. In this context, the mood in Bangladesh has been perfectly captured by an editorial by the *Hindustan Times*: "In Bangladesh, there is growing disquiet among the political leadership over threats by Indian politicians to

about the likelihood of a BJP return to power for five more years. One of the proponents of this view is Professor Imtiaz Ahmed of Dhaka University who, according to a report by *Dhaka Tribune*, says he will prefer a Congress-led government over BJP. "The main reason being that during the last five years under Narendra Modi, there has been a significant rise of Hindu extremism and intolerance towards minorities, especially Muslims." In case of BJP being re-elected, things are likely to get worse, he says. "If this happens, religious extremists in our country may use this as an excuse to harm our minorities, and provoke people to do the same." This is wishful thinking, however. Most analysts and voter surveys have put the BJP-led alliance ahead of the one led by Congress. But even a Congress government, in the unlikely event that it is formed and can resist the temptation of populism, may not fare any better in India's communally charged atmosphere. After all, the biggest threat in today's India is Hindu majoritarianism, which didn't begin with BJP and will not end with BJP either. And it is rising, by all indications, in the absence of a strong and attractive liberal alternative. Over the decades, the spirit of Hindu nationalism has penetrated so deeply into the heart of the Indian society that it's a wonder this is the same country that has a glorious history of struggle to build a liberal society. That being said, for Bangladesh, beyond the spillover effects of India's internal issues and policies, there is not much to worry about. Since its first day at work, the Modi government had focused on improving ties with India's immediate neighbours as part of its "neighbourhood first" policy. This will likely continue whichever party/alliance comes to power, because Indian foreign policy hardly changes with the change of a government in Delhi, especially with respect to Bangladesh. "In terms of cooperation in politics, business, and other sectors of cooperation, I don't expect any change in policies from either side of the border," says Imtiaz Ahmed. "They should continue as usual."

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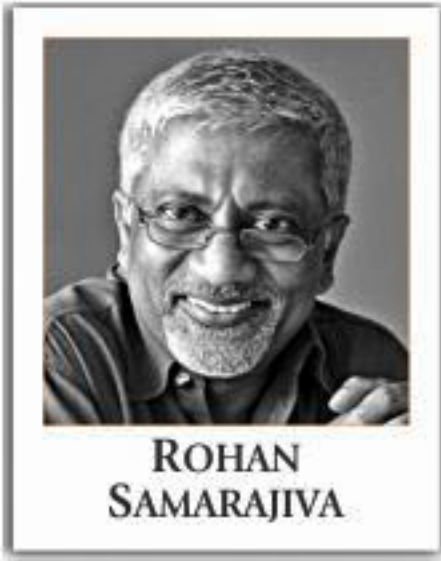


Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during an event in Allahabad, India, on February 24, 2019. PHOTO: AFP

similar kind of blur in left-wing politics in Europe, trying to combine liberal ideologies with the nativist/conservative rhetoric. For the record, immigration is an issue not just in Assam, which shares a porous border with Bangladesh, but also in other Indian states like West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Delhi. BJP has promised to root out illegal Bangladeshi immigrants (read Muslim immigrants) by implementing the National Registry of Citizens (NRC) nationwide. Since the hugely controversial NRC was mooted in Assam last year, it has prompted fears of possible deportation among hundreds of thousands of Bengali-speaking Muslims in the state. An estimated four million people's

push back people excluded from the National Register of Citizens... as well as India's perceived silence on the issue of Myanmar [not] taking back hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees now living in Bangladesh." One can safely say that this is a feeling shared by the ordinary Bangladeshis also. It's only reasonable that Bangladesh takes an active interest in how the Indian general election pans out. Although internal issues of one country are not expected to affect the other, often the opposite is the case, which finds a potent expression during elections in both countries. At this point, because of BJP's extremist pro-Hindu policies, most Bangladeshis will probably be concerned

Is it time for a policy on artificial intelligence?



ROHAN SAMARAJIVA

IS now the right time for Bangladesh to start addressing artificial intelligence (AI)? Are there more important issues deserving of the attention of policy makers and regulators at this time? Governments can choose to adopt network technologies, especially those dependent on the state's decisions to issue or not issue spectrum in particular bands or to assist or not with rights of way. The government of India, on the advice of Satyen Pitroda, decided in the late 1980s to pass on mobile telephony to focus on rural fixed telephony. Can today's governments choose to pass on artificial intelligence (AI) or connected devices (also known as Internet of Things or IoT)?

Why policy? Today, a Bangladeshi with hearing disability (or even those who are not so disabled) can use Google's Live Transcribe, recently introduced in over 70 languages including Bengali. This allows the person who cannot hear to read on her or his smartphone what the other person is saying in real time. Live Transcribe is based on AI. The person using Live Transcribe would have to be literate, possess a smartphone, have some kind of data connectivity and possess awareness of, and ability to, download the free app. According to the AfterAccess nationally representative survey conducted in Bangladesh in 2017, 24 percent of the 15-65 population of the country possessed smartphones, a number that should have increased by now. Persons with disabilities tend to use smartphones less, because of poverty and also because they are unaware how useful apps such as Live Transcribe can be. A government does not have to authorise a person with hearing disability to use Live Transcribe. Short of blocking Google or the Play Store, there is nothing a government can do to prevent such use. That also means that there is nothing to stop data from that person's conversations from being used to "train" the AI that powers the app which helps a disabled person understand what is being said. The more the Bengali app is used, the better trained the underlying AI will be. Over time, real-time transcription will improve. The point is that AI is seeping into our

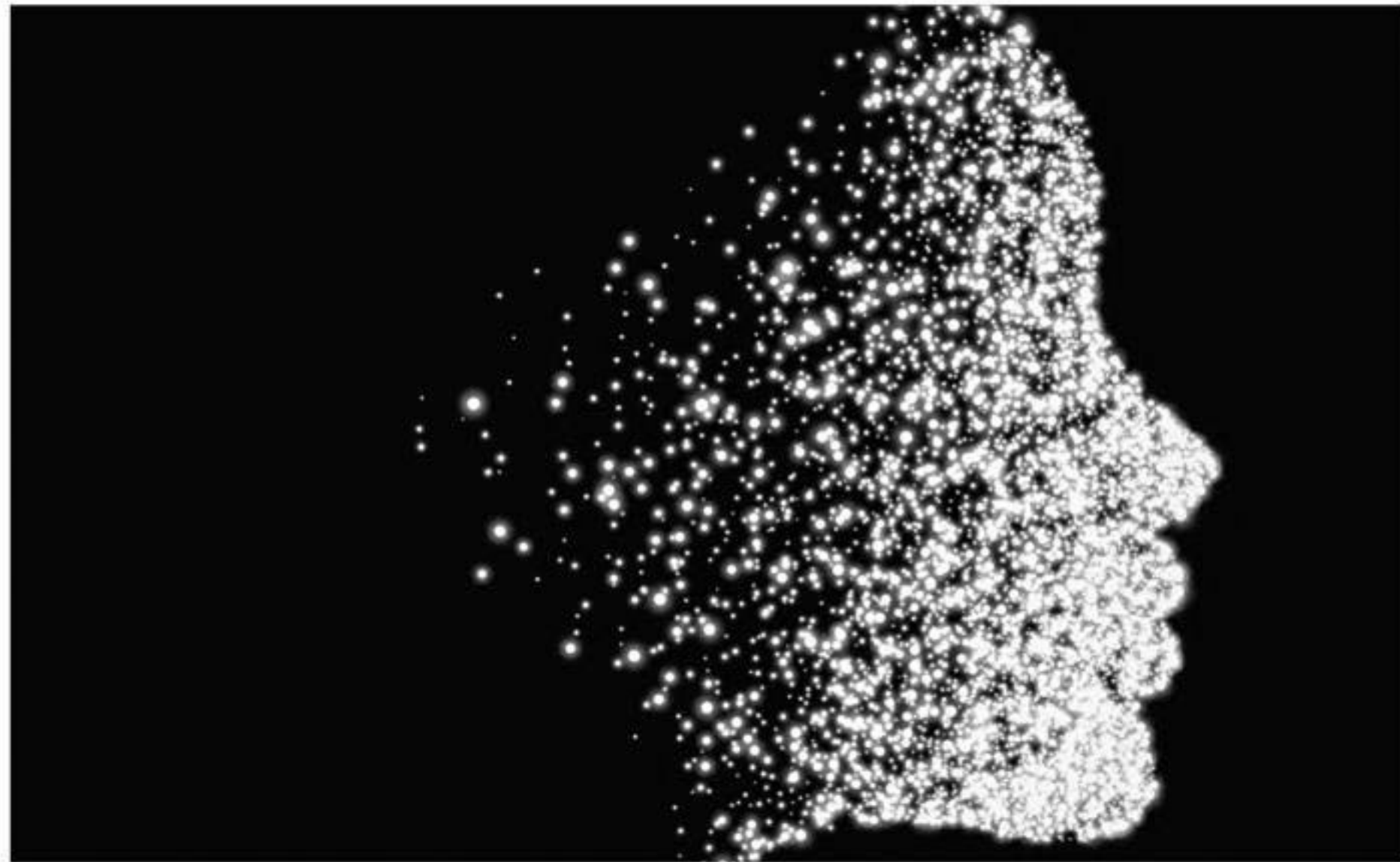
lives whether we like it or not; whether a strategy is in place or not. Why does a country (or a company) need an AI strategy? It needs a strategy to proactively adopt AI in its business processes, to position itself as a supplier of AI technology to other users, or both. Even now, Bangladeshi firms must be considering how to use AI to improve business processes and enhance their bottom lines. But there is little incentive for most businesses and the consultants who advise them to talk about the preconditions for effective absorption of AI in organisations. This has historical precedent. We first

The rules by which the software reaches its conclusions are opaque, so the results have to be verified against ground truth. Issues of bias or error have to be addressed. What works in California or with Chinese males may not necessarily work in Bangladesh. AI engineers are needed to customise software for specific conditions. So it's qualitatively different from when we started using computers. One could just buy spreadsheet software and use it with a little training. But AI requires skilled engineers to customise for best results, or least to minimise errors. In some cases, additional training data may

so on. Today, these things are likely to be marketed as AI. Data cleaning would most likely be necessary. Because analysis would be done in-house with internal data, data-protection issues are unlikely to crop up. It would be good to have a data scientist on staff, but not essential. Though the underlying software would most likely be open source, the consultants would have little incentive to open the black box unless the company or the in-house data scientist insists. Things would get more complicated if the company starts working with external data sets, such as when it seeks to gain insights for marketing. Here, there are issues of representivity (does the data accurately depict the target population?) and also limitations, if any, on how the data may be used (for example, is the data pseudonymised or anonymised? If it is the former, patterns can be identified, even if the individual cannot be). There would be a greater necessity for domain knowledge and possibly also for in-house expertise in analytics. For AI, training data is critically important. Many experts believe that China will lead in AI because of the greater availability of training data (China's digitalisation is highly advanced, for example in payments and facial recognition). Europe is likely to lag behind it because of excessive restrictions on data use and consent requirements.

Supply side Barriers to entry are relatively low in most IT domains, including in AI. Given the need for training data and skilled AI engineers even on the demand side, it makes sense to also explore the opportunities of becoming suppliers of AI solutions and AI-infused products. Now, as many governments are considering data-protection legislation, the time is opportune to adopt national AI strategies. Otherwise, Bangladesh may find the many opportunities of AI foreclosed by short-term considerations associated with doing business with Europe. Developing and implementing policy requires resources and skills. When both are scarce, prioritisation is even more important. When is the right time to develop AI policy? Unless the conversation is started now, it may be too late for Bangladesh's youth and businesses.

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SOURCE: PICANTE.TODAY

talked about adopting computers back in the 1980s; we addressed the supply side later. But with a large youth population (41.6 million in the 15-29 age group in 2015; now it should be higher), many with ICT credentials, can Bangladesh afford to wait?

Demand side What is AI? It is machines that show some behaviours that mimic human intelligence. These days, what we have are narrow AI in specific domains. It is based on deep learning wherein the software is trained on massive amounts of domain-specific data. AI can make decisions or advise those who are making decisions on creditworthiness; assist judges on bail and sentencing, based on correlations that suggest the likelihood of recidivism; or diagnose medical conditions faster and with fewer errors. AI has been used to generate Tang Dynasty poetry by a Sri Lankan data scientist. The possibilities are endless.

be needed. Where are these engineers? How will they keep up with the rapidly changing state of the art in AI? What can be done about ossified curricula in computer-science programmes? Where are the data? Are they in "datafied" form amenable to analysis? When the data are about people, one would also need data-protection safeguards. All these elements could be addressed through a well-formulated national strategy. It is high time government officials, private sector leaders and civil society initiate a national conversation on the subject.

From big data to AI Before AI, big data and data analytics were the buzzwords. It was possible to ask a consultant to, for example, run a company's customer records through a "black box" proprietary software to identify the most valuable customers, predict the ones most likely to defect and

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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