

US resolution on 1971 genocide must get rid of divisive language

The attempt to delineate Hindus as separate from Bengalis in Bangladesh is unacceptable to us as a nation



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The new resolution in the US Congress introduced by Republican congressman Steve Chabot recognising the 1971 genocide is a good step forward for Bangladesh, and the world in general. It is important to make sure that history is not forgotten and that the international community takes steps to address past cases of grievous human rights abuses and bring the perpetrators to book when possible.

The resolution has received bipartisan support, being co-sponsored by Representatives Ro Khanna, Katie Porter and Tom Malinowski – all of them Democrats. However, it is concerning that some of the language used is deeply divisive, with the Bangladeshi Americans for Political Progress (BAPP) calling it “more about stoking hate across religious lines than justice.”

Steve Chabot crafted this resolution with the help of the Hindu American Foundation, an American Hindu advocacy group with roots in the Hindu nationalist organisation Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) America. The VHP has been accused of contributing to violence against Muslims in India, including playing a role in the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the Ayodhya dispute. The VHP is also considered a member of the Sangh Parivar group, a group of Hindu nationalist organisations led by the RSS, which in turn has ties with the BJP. Therefore, it can be argued that the group has its own political interests that do not align with the interests of Bangladesh, or of anyone who wants a nation devoid of religious bigotry.

Because it has been crafted by Hindu nationalists, the resolution's language is rife with attempts at establishing Hindus in Bangladesh as separate from Bengalis. Part of the resolution reads, “Atrocities continued during the ensuing nine-month Bangladesh War of Independence as the Pakistani military scapegoated ethnic Bengalis and Hindus and targeted supporters of the Awami League, Bengali military or police personnel, intellectuals, students, and professionals, while victims included members of both majority (Bengali Muslim) and minority (non-Muslim) communities.”

This language is deeply problematic as it separates Hindus from Bengalis, as if Bangladeshi Hindus are not Bengali at all and constitute a separate nation by themselves. This simply is not true. Bangladeshi nationalism, which is rooted in language and culture and has been built up through a shared



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

history of struggle against Pakistan's colonial oppression, supersedes religious boundaries. Bangladesh/Bengali nationalism is inclusive of all religious identities, and separating the Hindu community from it is a devious attempt to portray them as not integrated into the national culture of Bangladesh. Bangladeshi Hindus are part of Bangladesh, but Hindu nationalists like Priya Saha, a loud supporter of this divisive resolution, want to repudiate this.

Moreover, no official consultation with Bangladesh was deemed necessary by those involved in the crafting of this bill. No Bangladeshi organisations were consulted, despite the fact that many are involved in researching the 1971 genocide. Even more surprisingly, the co-chair of the House Caucus on India wrote the resolution without the input of the Bangladesh Caucus or House Foreign Affairs Committee, as if Bangladeshi affairs do not merit a separate consideration and simply falls under India's concerns.

It is true that the resolution has its many merits. It includes a mention of Operation Searchlight. It mentions the 1971 genocide as one of the forgotten genocides of the 20th century, and says that its lack of recognition remains an open wound

for millions of people who were directly affected by the atrocities. Its mention of the approximate numbers of people killed and raped in the atrocities match the accounts of the Bangladesh government. It provides an estimation of how many refugees fled to India and what proportion of people were displaced. And finally, it calls on the Government of Pakistan,



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

Conservation science has moved on

We, too, must adapt and change



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A series of recent media reports – about the proposal to hand over chunks of a reserve forest to different non-forestry departments, the removal of old trees from several cities, and building a road through a reserve forest – highlights the apparent collision between nature conservation and the nation's prosperity.

Humans have cleared forests for habitation, food, fuel, communication and other needs since time immemorial. However, today, the size of the human population has neared the Earth's carrying capacity. The planet's climate is warming, sea levels are rising, and biodiversity is diminishing. The threats resulting from climate warming and loss of nature are no longer theoretical, but a brutal reality. But how have we reached this point? And how has the idea of nature conservation evolved?

Interestingly, humanity did not think about conserving nature until the end of the Middle Ages. Although British botanist John Evelyn proposed the idea of preserving and restoring forests in 1662, others did not act on it for the next 100-plus years. Then came the Industrial Age, which coincided with the Industrial Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars.

During that time, the world ran almost on coal power and durable wood was in great demand for naval shipbuilding. This created concerns over the depletion of timber, leading to the birth of forest management. More specifically, the rulers of Prussia, France and the colonies of British India made cutting valuable trees under a specific size illegal – the beginning of nature conservation with a pointer to sustainability.

The idea of nature conservation gained momentum in the late 18th century when George Perkins Marsh,

an American naturalist, argued for the then current generation's ethical responsibility to save nature for the next generation in his famous book *Man and Nature* (1864). This possibly marked the moment in history when nature began to be valued not just for industry, but for the sake of the environment.

In the 19th century, many countries became keen on nature conservation. Humanity also reached the Age of Oil, reducing the pressure on trees for energy. Meanwhile, in the 1930s, the US experienced a decade-long severe drought. British scientist Guy Stewart Callender looked into the event and suggested carbon emissions through coal-burning might be warming the Earth – the birth of the climate warming idea. US scientist Charles D Keeling followed Callender's work and took CO2 readings from Hawaii and Antarctica for several years, ultimately confirming the global warming theory in the 1950s. By the end of the decade, scientists were convinced that CO2 emissions could be problematic for the environment. The International Union for Conservation of Nature was also established in 1948 to protect nature, mainly for goods, services and environmental benefits.

Finally, we entered the Information Age, when US ecologist Edward O Wilson coined the term “biodiversity” in the 1980s. Following that, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) came into existence in 1992, while the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established in 1989. The first international agreement to reduce greenhouse gases, the Kyoto Protocol, was signed in 1997.

Of course, many more amendments and protocols to

mitigate climate warming and protect biodiversity followed. The latest addition is the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), formed in 2012 to strengthen the role of science in public decision-making on biodiversity and ecosystem services. The IPBES emphasises that nature is not necessarily a wilderness area away from people, but a socio-ecological template where society's day-to-day interactions are a norm.

Nevertheless, today when we talk about nature conservation, we tend to think that the more species an ecosystem carries, the more beneficial it is. However, the idea of nature conservation has evolved once again. The modern concept emphasises conserving species' trait diversity (known as functional diversity) and evolutionary history, because these determine what functions a species performs and what services it provides.

Unsurprisingly, practitioners in developed Asia, Europe, Australia and American countries are now focusing on conserving functional diversity and evolutionary history beyond species. In Bangladesh, however, we are still struggling. We are vocal about saving nature but somewhat reluctant about implementing modern approaches to nature conservation. Although there have been changes, like how our national forest policy just shifted from production forestry to conservation forestry, the focus still lies on species. We must think beyond that and focus on saving functional diversity and evolutionary history.

At the same time, we should urge the government to reverse any conservation adverse decisions and instead focus on building new nature within socio-ecological templates, such as in and around city open spaces, urban areas and riverbanks. Our ability to save and manage existing nature efficiently and generate new nature is the key to tackling climate and biodiversity crises and, in turn, building a climate-resilient, ecologically civilised and green Bangladesh.

OPINION

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Gift-wrapping need

5 March 14, to math fans

10 Pop stars

12 Pal, to Pedro

13 Indiscreet

15 Blunder

16 Cargo unit

17 “The Raven” writer

18 Handles

20 Relate

21 Uses a towel

22 Track figures

23 Put up

25 Carpet type

28 Soundless sheepish

31 Scoop holder

32 Never before seen

34 Director Lee

35 Building wing

36 Chicken – king

37 Supple

40 Film’s Flynn

41 Nick of “Affliction”

42 College heads

43 Garden pest

DOWN

1 Floor squares

2 Found charming

3 Less well-off

4 High trains

5 Aspirin target

6 Little rascal

7 Dropped down

8 Ancient

9 Alpine calls

11 Hunting dog

14 Fumble result

19 Long attack

20 Add up

24 Radio show format

25 Climbed

26 Writer Balzac

27 Soft wool

29 Make possible

30 Take out

33 Crossed the creek

35 Snaky fish

38 Bart, to Homer

39 Cut, as hay

YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

S	C	A	T	A	M	B	E	R
M	A	N	O	N	L	O	A	N
R	O	O	T	S	O	N	R	E
T	E	N	A	N	T	S	E	A
S	C	A	L	P	R	E	S	E
T	O	M	E	S	U	N	D	S
A	R	I	T	E	N	D	O	N
I	R	A	O	V	E	R	L	A
R	U	B	B	L	E	L	I	V
S	P	L	E	E	N	L	I	V
T	E	N	T	S	S	E	E	D

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT