



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

# A lunch date gone wrong



OF MAGIC  
& MADNESS

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It wasn't a "date" so much as it was damage control by police in a rather absurd turn of events. But let us stick with the term for now because optics matter, more so in Bangladesh's politics than anywhere else, and because the paradoxical nature of what was on offer – for both Gayeshwar Chandra Roy and the intended wider audience – and the unsavoury background to that offering makes it difficult to digest without a slight pinch of comedy.

First, let us spare a minute on the spectacle before we delve into the background. In pictures and videos that have gone viral, the senior BNP leader is seen having lunch with an unlikely host, the chief of the Detective Branch of police. Before them is a lavish spread of delicacies apparently brought in from a five-star hotel. It was a culinary showdown, with enough fruits and dishes to give anyone, as the saying goes, a "fine dining" experience. Although Gayeshwar has later clarified that he only accepted food brought from the DB chief's home, the spectacle held a power of its own, causing reactions both funny and speculative.

A second spectacle witnessed on the same day had another senior BNP leader, Amanullah Aman, tied to a hospital bed, receiving an unexpected lunch package courtesy of the prime minister herself. This image too quickly went viral.

So there it was: proof that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government is not insensitive to the needs of political rivals, offering them food and hospitality even when they were found in the crosshairs of law enforcement. Both leaders, in case you didn't know, sustained injuries earlier in the day during BNP's sit-in programme at the city's entry points – both, ironically, beaten in clashes with police or ruling party activists. Under pressure from all sides, Awami League was not about to let the potential of this photo op go to waste.

Its general secretary, Obaidul Quader, while denying his party had anything to do with the public dissemination of these images, couldn't resist mocking: "Why had he [Gayeshwar] eaten the meal? Was he that hungry? What type of a political leader is he?"

Or maybe it was this: an orchestrated episode meant to portray a false narrative, distract attention from the wider concerns in public life, and create confusion

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among BNP's rank and file at a time when it is trying to mobilise public support for its one-point demand for the government's resignation in favour of national elections under a non-party interim administration. BNP has said as much, with both of its leaders hitting out at the government for using the photos for political advantage. Gayeshwar, not one to mince his words (pun intended), found the whole episode of offering food – and then turning it into political feed – "in low taste," and labelled it "shameful."

Whichever narrative you find yourself leaning toward, it must be acknowledged that such pictures of apparent hospitality are so rare in our present political history that one needs to go back over 15 years in time for the closest reference to what a newspaper has termed "video politics" – it was during the last caretaker government, before Awami League came to power, when videos of one of its veteran leaders, then in custody, with fruits placed in front of him, were widely disseminated.

The problem with such images is that once they go viral, it is impossible to un-viral them or the message they ostensibly contain. It's little wonder that a significant percentage of social media users – in admiration or contempt – found the Gayeshwar/Amanullah spectacles compulsively absorbing.

But the truth eventually comes out. The lunch is eventually seen for what it is – not a lunch of the kind we know, but a poor attempt at making up for brutalities publicly inflicted, brutalities that, in the age of a punitive US visa policy, may end up blowing up in the face of those behind them. Or at least this is how BNP's general secretary wants us to review this episode. Unfortunately for Awami League, this may just outlast all other theories making rounds at the moment, and unfortunately for us, the party may not care.

Public beating followed by public courtship – is this going to be a new political trend then? What's next on the menu? A parliamentary potluck for the surviving opposition MPs? A cabinet buffet? A charity football match between the serial beaters and serial victims of our confrontational politics? A sword duel to decide who gets to sit at the helm? Seeing how things have taken a strange turn lately – misusing authority to stage the optics of serving wounded/detained political opponents – it may not be long before "you've been served" enters the glossary of political double entendre.

Jokes aside, there is really no takeaway from Saturday's food fiasco. It will go down as yet another example of pointless political posturing – an inconsequential subplot, really, in the big political drama that is currently unfolding in the country.

## US CONGRESSIONAL HEARING ON UFOS

# Are they fact, fiction, or fantasy?



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On July 26, 2023, the House Oversight Subcommittee on National Security, the Border and Foreign Affairs of the United States House of Representatives convened to hear testimony from three retired military veterans regarding their sightings of Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena (UAP), a new term that encompasses not just Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) but also any craft or phenomena observed in space or underwater that cannot be identified. The hearing was held after the whistleblower David Grusch, a former intelligence officer of the US Air Force, claimed that the US government was hiding evidence of "non-human intelligence" in its possession.

Before discussing the outcome of the hearing, a brief history of UFOs is in order. Following the publication of HG Wells' *The War of the Worlds* in 1898, there was a wave of reports of strange objects seen sailing through the skies in the US as well as other parts of the world. Later, in his book *Chariots of the Gods?* written in 1968, Erich von Däniken presented the theory that ancient Earth had been visited by aliens. Interest in UFOs increased greatly during World War II when US fighter pilots used the term "foo fighters" to refer to unexplained sightings in the sky.

The modern fascination with UFOs began with a widely reported sighting on June 24, 1947. While flying a small plane near Mount Rainier in Washington, Kenneth Arnold, a businessman from Idaho, reported seeing nine dazzling, disk-shaped objects drifting in a tight formation. Two weeks later, a rancher reported finding unidentifiable debris near Roswell, New Mexico. Since then, there have been numerous reports of encounters with UFOs.

Now, back to the hearing where former US Navy aviator Ryan Graves, former US Navy commander David Fravor, and whistleblower David Grusch testified about UAPs. Ryan Graves told the panel

develop desktop computers just because a laptop somehow landed in their cave.

The scepticism about UFO sightings is aptly described by Republican Representative Eric Burlison, of Missouri, when he said, "the concept that an alien species is technologically advanced enough to travel billions of light years and gets here, and is somehow incompetent enough to not survive Earth and crashes, is something I

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find a little far-fetched."

Representative Burlison is right on the money. There were many gaping holes and inconsistencies in the testimony of the officers. Hence, their testimony does not have any scientific merit whatsoever. Also, if the US government is indeed running a secret UFO research programme, it is simply wasting taxpayers' money.

However, hyperbole about UFO sightings begs the question: are UFOs real? Are they fact, fiction or fantasy? We cannot answer these questions until the aliens get in touch with us or we find evidence of their existence. Anyhow, if they are real, then the high speed, sharp angle turns of their spaceships darting at supersonic speed through Earth's atmosphere without a sonic boom violates some of the fundamental laws of physics.

Furthermore, calculations based on known propulsion systems indicate that it would take thousands of years for an alien spaceship to travel the distance from even the nearest star, Alpha Centauri A, which is 41.6 trillion kilometres away. The travel time could be cut down to a few decades if the spaceship could travel at speeds comparable to the speed of light. Any alien society that could do so routinely would be far more technologically advanced than ours.



A UFO was photographed by a government employee near Holloman Air Development Center in New Mexico on Oct. 16, 1957. The photo was released by the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization after careful study.

PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE

that commercial airline pilots had spotted UAPs operating in military airspace. He believes that it is an "urgent and critical national security issue" that deserves better scientific scrutiny. But the stigma associated with sightings "silences" possible witnesses from reporting the episodes. He wants the government to establish a "safe and transparent reporting process." David Fravor asserted that in 2004, he and three fellow military pilots saw something "unsettling" above the Pacific Ocean, hovering below their jets. As he descended to inspect the object, a UAP with no visible rotors, wings or exhaust began to ascend and approach his fighter jet. According to him, it suddenly vanished, only to reappear a few seconds later. But this time he saw it 60 miles away, accelerating to "supersonic speeds."

The most dramatic moment of the hearing came when David Grusch claimed that he is absolutely certain the US government is in possession of "intact and partially intact" UAPs. He said that over a four-year period, he interviewed dozens of individuals who recovered "non-human biologicals" from UAP crash sites. Grusch talked about many friendly ears in the committee who were already convinced that the government is involved in secret programmes involving aliens and UAPs.

Does Grusch's allegation of the government possessing UAPs hold water? During the hearing, Grusch did not present any material evidence in support of his claim. Besides, in June, the Pentagon said it could not find "any verifiable information to substantiate" the claims about crashed alien spacecraft. While the government might be successful in concealing evidence for a short time, it seems implausible to them that such evidence could remain secret for decades. It is thus inconceivable that the government is trying to put a lid on evidence of alien visits.

On the other hand, conspiracy theorists, who also believe in the abduction of earthlings by aliens, allege that the government is taking advantage of UFOs to design new military hardware via "reverse engineering." However, reverse engineering UFOs is as unlikely as expecting Neanderthals to

Largely out of concern that UFO sightings by Arnold and others might represent new types of aircraft developed by the Soviet Union, the US Air Force hired teams of scientists to investigate the incidents. After nearly two decades of sifting through evidence, the overall conclusion was that there was no reason to believe that UFOs are either highly advanced Soviet aircraft or spacecraft piloted by aliens from other worlds.

So, what are these mysterious objects that were sighted by so many? What can science say about UFOs? Although a staple for science fiction movies and novels, the fuzzy blobs and spinning lights are definitely not UFOs. We can attribute the sighting of UFOs to many known astronomical phenomena, such as bright stars, meteors, or asteroids with orbits close to Earth. Because of its high luminosity, Venus is often mistaken for a UFO when it appears low on the horizon.

The UFOs could also be aircraft, gliders or balloons, or a weather-related spectacle known as St Elmo's fire, caused by reflections of light from ice crystals in the atmosphere, or "sprites" that are flashes of electrical discharges triggered by thunderstorms high in the atmosphere, or "lens clouds" – a UFO-shaped object that is formed when wind blows moist air over tall structures like hills and mountains, seen in the skies over Turkey in May 2023.

As for Arnold's UFO, it could be a fireball – a meteor breaking up upon entry into Earth's atmosphere. The debris in Roswell, according to the US military, are the remnants of high-altitude balloons carrying acoustical equipment to monitor Soviet nuclear tests, and foo fighters were probably St Elmo's fire.

Finally, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence because there is no way for us to verify someone's eyewitness account of a UFO. Nevertheless, for all its faults and limitations, science is the best means by which rational beings can distinguish between what is real and what is not real. We can therefore conclude that UFOs are not real. Instead, they are fantasies of a stressed-out society.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

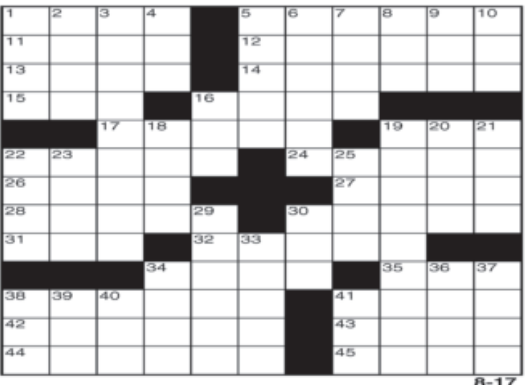
### ACROSS

- 1 Diminishes
- 5 Emotionla shock
- 11 Olympian leader
- 12 Assailed
- 13 Tenant's fee
- 14 Monticello, e.g.
- 15 Compass trace
- 16 Watch part
- 17 17-syllable poem
- 19 Deep hole
- 22 VCR button
- 24 Radiate
- 26 Finish last
- 27 Some bills
- 28 The Grinch's creator
- 30 Yoda's creator
- 31 Swiss peak
- 32 "– the Raven..."
- 34 Put on the wall
- 35 Longoria of TV

### DOWN

- 1 Pound of poems
- 2 Saloon staple
- 3 Gathers in a cluster
- 4 Fast plane
- 5 Fine-tune
- 6 Save
- 7 Poker payment
- 8 Hagen of the theater
- 9 Small rug
- 10 Finished off
- 16 In shage
- 18 Good pair

- 19 Enlivens, as text
- 20 Inkleing
- 21 Thomas Hardy heroine
- 22 "Frozen" queen'
- 23 Singer Billy
- 25 Mark as deleted
- 29 Knight's attendant
- 30 Lumber unit
- 33 Beneath
- 34 Plucked instrument
- 36 Tum suddenly
- 37 Showily
- pretentious
- 38 Phone download
- 39 Fragrant tree
- 40 Old auto
- 41 Battleship letters



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