

A Case for Bangladeshi-Australians to Consider

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The world environment for Muslims has dramatically changed after 9/11. Then followed the Bali bombings in 2002, Madrid railway carnage in 2004 and July 7th bombings in London transportation system this year.

The Western countries have been engaged in enacting draconian laws to prevent terrorism and Australian government has been reportedly drafting similar legislations, curtailing civic liberties.

There could be two views in the matter of such laws but the bottom line is that the image of Muslims has been tarnished and anyone bearing an Arabic or Persian name is a suspect in Western countries. One cannot entirely blame non-Muslims for doing so.

A crisis of identity for moderate Muslim majority countries:

Muslim majority countries have been facing a crisis because a fringe group of extremists has hijacked the true meaning of Islam and the moderate and tolerant views on Islam has been submerged.

Bangladesh is a non-Arab Muslim majority country (not Islamic country) and although its population is overwhelmingly Muslims (88% per cent), Bangladesh is a multi-religious, multi-racial and multi-lingual country. 45 ethnic tribes live in Bangladesh and they speak their language within their families and tribes.

Bangladesh is a country where Islamic parties on average secured in the past elections not more than 10% per cent. Statistics show that *Jamaat Islami* party lost popular votes in successive elections from 1991. In 1991 it secured 12.13% per cent, in 1996 8.61% per cent and in 2001 4.3% per cent. In 2001 election, the share of popular vote between the two main parties was AL: 40.13% per cent, BNP: 40.97% per cent, according to a report.

Some characteristics of Islamic practices in Bangladesh:

Bangladeshi Muslims practice Islam that has underpinnings on cultural roots on land. As the Sun cannot be separated from the sunshine, so also culture cannot

be divorced from the geographic location of the territory, its climate and history. Islam is not a monolithic religion and its practices vary from country to country, although the core message remains the same.

Some of the Islamic practices most Muslim Bangladeshi perform are not in conformity with those in Arab countries, for example, holding milad mehfil or touching feet of the elders as a sign of respect at the first meeting after a long interval.

Furthermore, Bangladesh is the only Muslim majority country that is totally surrounded by non-Muslim countries. The nearest Muslim country in the west is Pakistan and in the southeast is Malaysia. Both are thousands miles away from Bangladesh. Bangladesh's immediate and near neighbours are India, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Bhutan and China (100 miles away across the Himalayas).

The geographical position makes Bangladeshi people interact intimately with people of other faiths. Many Muslims in Bangladesh share the festivities of other faiths as social occasions. There are more than 15 million people who are non-Muslims in the country, not ordinarily known or highlighted in overseas.

There is another aspect that is worth mentioning. Given the increasing empowerment of women in Bangladesh through micro-credit and employment in garment industries, women are seen in public places and the new-found freedom of women, many social scientists say, will act as a barrier to spread of fundamentalism in the country.

Image Problem:

The moderate and tolerant image of Bangladesh has finally been rattled by the 17th August bombings across the country. Now Bangladesh has a serious image problem overseas and it seems that it threatens to swamp or overwhelm the overall positive socio-economic developments in Bangladesh for the last 14 years of democratic rule.

How image or perception of a country is built?

The way the rest of the world looks at Bangladesh has multiple aspects, i.e. social, political, cultural and economic. Perception or image is derived from a multiplicity of contacts and interactions that Bangladesh has with the rest of the world at different levels, intergovernmental and private, and in different spheres.

These interactions include selective contacts with Bangladeshi citizens or migrants, at home or abroad or important incidents, mostly negative, widely reported in the international media.

Why does the image of Bangladesh matter?

It matters because under economic globalisation, Bangladesh is gradually integrating with global economy. The attitude and views of outsiders about Bangladesh society have an impact on foreign investment and relations. Furthermore image is like reputation, once it is tainted, it takes a long time to build.

Role of Bangladeshi-Australians:

Here the role of Bangladeshi-Australians comes into play to project the right image of Bangladesh. It is admitted that good news do not sell, only bad news attract news media.

On average statistics show that Bangladeshi Australians are more educated and skilled than their counterparts from India and Pakistan. They are contributing their skills in various fields in Australia and almost of all of them are peaceful and law-abiding citizens. Hardly they come in the bad book of the law and it is a great credit for Bangladeshis who according to one statistics account for 14,000 in Australia.

What they can do?

First, in my view, Bangladesh-Australian Association in major cities may have another arm which is chaired or co-chaired by an eminent Australian (e.g. former Australian High Commissioners to Bangladesh).

Whatever name the arm of the association is designated, it can celebrate the national and social holidays of both countries, such as New Years Day, Australian Day, Canberra Day, Bangla New Years Day etc.

Second, Bangladesh community may consider in taking an active interest in local, state and national elections and as volunteers, they can participate in election campaign for mainstream political parties. This will provide an opportunity for Bangladeshi-Australians to interact with key people in Australian political parties. The dividends may not be immediate but in the long term would be greatly beneficial for Bangladesh's image.

Third, Bangladeshi entrepreneurs may establish business networking with local chamber of commerce and industry. Since January of this year, Bangladeshi goods are exempt from duty in Australia.

Finally, local media must be cultivated through invitations to social functions and meeting with them. An exchange of views may be held between Bangladesh

community and the media. This will provide the media to allay their perceived concerns in respect of image of Bangladesh.

Conclusion:

The above is my personal view and should not be taken as a criticism of any body or any association. I have seen more summers and winters than the people I have been privileged to meet with in Canberra.

I was Ambassador for Bangladesh for 11 years, besides holding senior positions in the Bangladesh Foreign Office and have served the country as best as I could. What I am today is due to the emergence of Bangladesh.

I left Pakistan's foreign office and escaped to Bangladesh via Kabul and New Delhi with my family of young children, the eldest was only 5 years of age. I have now nothing to ask for. God has been kind to me.

The purpose of the paper is to stimulate constructive debate and assist Bangladesh community reach a consensus how to project a positive image of Bangladesh in Australia. I leave it entirely to my younger generation of Bangladeshi-Australians, who I think, are smarter, more imaginative and innovative than we were at their age who grew up without computers and cell-phones. During our time, the state of art gadget was the acquisition of an electric typewriter that I bought in 1959 as a student in London.

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