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Bengals clash on Bengalis' strength & weakness

Anasuya Basu

The argumentative Bengali was in full form at Lake Club on Saturday evening.

Calcutta Debating Circle had gathered a clutchful of Bengalis from *epar* and *opar* Bangla to indulge in some verbal fisticuffs at Calcutta-Dhaka Tarka Bitarka, presented by Calcutta Debating Circle, in association with *Anandabazar Patrika*, with **The Telegraph** as the media partner.

Motion of the House: *Bangali du bhaag, tai durbal* (Bengalis are divided into two, so they are weak)

FOR

Alapan Bandyopadhyay

Transport secretary, Bengal

To say we are weak only because we are divided is not right. If we had lived near the Arabian Sea, close to West Asian Arab business and commerce, we would have not been weak. We are weak because our society is deeply divided between the Brahmins and the Sudras. If we had more respect for labour, perhaps we would have been stronger.

Bengali as a community is around a thousand years old. Around 1000AD, language-based regional states started forming in the Sanskritic cosmopolis.... So we had the Kannada, the Maharashtrians, the Gujaratis and all the people living in the area spanning between the Nepal borders and the Bay of Bengal, that included Bihar, Orissa, Assam, and Bengal formed one unified Bengal state. But in 1911 Bihar went out, then went Orissa in 1930, and then there was Partition in 1947. Bengal, caught in this communal frenzy, cut off its two hands.

THE SPEAKERS



(From left) Speakers Anindya Chattopadhyay, Shabnam Azim, Suman Mukhopadhyay, Abhirup Sarkar, Alapan Bandyopadhyay, Md Jahangir, moderator Kunal Sarkar, Arifa Rahman Ruma, Enamur Rahman, Zayadul Ahsan Pintu and Ritabhari Chakraborty

And so now, the jute mills are here but jute grows in Bangladesh, the railway is divided.... This division in economy and communication has only served to make us weak. The dominance of upper caste Hindus should never be back. The culture that gave birth to Sufism and Vaishnavism, the culture that allowed people to travel through Jessore Road to reach Jessore, should rise again. The big common market should be back. Humayun Ahmed and Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay should unite, Agartala-Dhaka-Calcutta should be joined....

AGAINST

Md Jahangir

Cultural activist and media specialist (Bangladesh)



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We might be weak but we are not weak because we are divided. We cannot deny Partition, but we should not waste time crying over it. We should come to terms with it and think of ways to become stronger.... Bengalis have achieved a lot. West Bengal has contributed hugely to literature, culture and cinema. We Bangladeshis have established a sovereign, independent state. What we could do is determine the ways and areas in which we could cooperate. That could bring back our self-confidence.

FOR

Abhirup Sarkar

Economist

Bengalis were never pehelwans , *they were never sportsmen, they were good in studies but not so much any longer. Let's not even talk about their business acumen.*

There have always been divisions in Bengal - East Bengal-Mohun Bagan divide, CPM-Trinamul divide, Uttam Kumar-Soumitra divide. But the division that began in 1905 - it was reversed briefly in 1911 - became permanent in 1947, when Bengal was divided on religious grounds. But apart from this division, Bengalis are divided in their thinking. The Bengalis of West Bengal think they are the only Bengalis, Bangladeshis are just Bangladeshis. But Bangladeshis are more Bengali than us. They learn and teach the Bengali language much more than we do....

The country (Bangladesh) has achieved a lot. It is one of the leading exporters of readymade garments. We also have something to give them, like our knowledge in science, economics, and medicine.

AGAINST

Arifa Rahman Ruma

Professor, Bangladesh Open University

Isn't the bond of love stronger than the bond of wealth? I have come to you with this bond of love. Bengalis live not just in West Bengal or Bangladesh, they live in all corners of the world. And you are Indians only when we are Bangladeshis. But when you are Bengalis, we are Bengalis too.... Our national anthem is a Rabindrasangeet. Have you not been influenced by Bangladeshi literature? Have I not read and relished Shirshendu?... Our mutual love for sweets at the end of a meal marks us out as Bengalis.

FOR

Anindya Chattopadhyay

Musician-filmmaker

Bengalis have always been weak. They are an emotional lot. Bengalis love to compare. There is always a comparison between Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, Uttam Kumar and Soumitra Chattopadhyay, Hemanta and Manab Mukhopadhyay. We are never happy with our lot. We want to climb Everest but cannot climb a flight of stairs. If we Bengalis were united, we would have had a better cricket team. When Bengalis are leaving their countries and excelling in other countries, back home we remain divided.

AGAINST

Enamur Rahman

Bangladesh Awami League MP

We are not weak, we have not been divided in our minds. We are united in our hearts. We are self-sufficient in food, we have a strong defence, we are doing well economically. Where Americans, British, French, Germans have failed, we Bengalis have fought and won against terrorism. We Bengalis should unite.... We have three Nobel laureates amongst us. Both Bengalis are developed and we will achieve even greater heights together.

FOR

Shabnam Azim

Professor, Dhaka University

Even when we are politically divided, language, culture and sensitivity unite us. If Partition had really created a rift between us, then would Indian Bengalis have fought with us in the 1971 Liberation War? But we fail when none of the Bangladeshi channels telecasts here. When we have to beg for visas, we are weak. When Bhasha Divas is only celebrated by Bangladeshis, we are weak.



(From far left) Soumitra Chatterjee, Jawahar Sircar, Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay and Krishna Bose
Pictures by Koushik Saha

AGAINST

Ritabhari Chakraborty

Actress

Bengalis form the world's third largest community and their language is the seventh most popularly spoken. In numbers, we are not weak. Bengalis live not just in Dhaka and Calcutta, but also in Odisha and Assam. The Bengali diaspora is large - there are 1.5 lakh of us in the US, New Jersey is called a mini-Bangladesh.... They are all excelling and becoming strong. So how are we weak? Yes, there is a brain drain but that does not make Bengalis weak.

FOR

Suman Mukhopadhyay

Film-theatre director

Division of a nation weakens its people. When a country is divided in the name of religion, from colonial pressure, thousands suffer. The sorrow of losing home and hearth creates havoc among people. There is a lot of internal grief, sorrow that takes hundreds of years to heal. It is played out in literature, cinema, songs. That Bengalis have been able to overcome this sorrow is in itself a big thing. About 25 crore people speak Bengali. It is the third largest population, but they are divided into two countries. We are divided in economy, business and even cinema. If a film made in West Bengal released both here and in Bangladesh and vice versa, the economy of the Bengali film industry would have been so large. We have so many writers - Bibhutibhushan, Manik Bandopadhyay, Shamsur Rahman, Humayun Ahmed - but only one Nobel prize in literature. This is a reflection of our weakness.

AGAINST

Zayadul Ahsan Pintu

Journalist

I was supposed to argue for the motion but I was told I had to debate against it, and I agreed. If this does not make me brave, then what will? Bengal has been divided but Bengalis are not divided. We are Bengalis first, then Muslims, you are Bengalis first and then Indians or Hindus. We should think the way Sher-e-Bengal Fazlul Haque had told us in 1954, that we will not be weak if we can be united.

The House voted For the Motion



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