

## Higher education plan National consensus imperative

THE news that an expert committee submitted a 20-year higher education plan to the prime minister last Monday and that she has ordered the formation of a monitoring cell to oversee its implementation sounds more like an academic exercise than anything else. When the government is at the fag-end of its tenure and has pressing electoral reform issues on the table, the dramatic unveiling of such a far-fetched higher educational plan cannot but intrigue us.

The basic questions that come to mind are why the initiative was not taken much earlier by the government; why it was not put up to elicit public opinion; how a committee can draw up a 20-year education plan without the involvement of other political parties and civil society members; and whether such a two-decade long plan is either feasible, or even desirable in view of the changing educational parameters from time to time.

Education being the engine for development, the trivialisation of the process of policy preparation, that too unilaterally, cannot escape notice in a democratic set up. However, no one contests the need for strategic plan for higher education and some of the contents of the draft such as rendering campuses free of party politics and creation of endowment funds are commendable ideas, to say the least.

Formulation of an education policy is different from drawing up a plan for a project like a bridge or a hospital because the former is going to affect the lives of thousands of students and the system as a whole for a long time to come. Reforms in the education sector are no doubt needed but there has to be a national consensus on the pertinent issues to ensure implementation of the reform agenda through political vagaries of all kind. We are aware that higher education curricula are being regularly updated in the developed countries in a bid to make them more pragmatic, dynamic and need-based. Perhaps we need the same more than others.

All said and done, we strongly feel that the draft national policy on education be withheld till the next elections are held and a new government is formed. Then it must be a subject matter of public discourse before placing it in parliament for scrutiny, debate and adoption.

## Spirited celebrations A resounding assertion of ethos

PEOPLE welcomed Pahela Baishakh with the kind of enthusiasm and aplomb that made the occasion a splendid point of convergence for all. It brought the resonant throb of life that has somehow been missing in our collective existence, thanks to the spectre of violence haunting the nation as a whole. People overcame the gloom and fell in a mood of unmixed merry-making. It was their day.

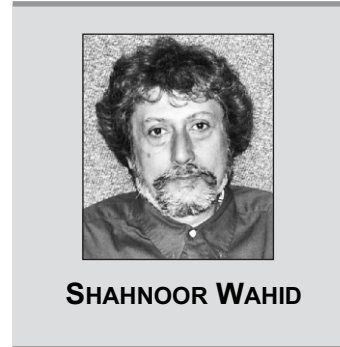
In the capital, they took to the streets, colorfully attired and attuned to the vibrant spirit of Pahela Baishakh, and enjoyed every bit of the festivity. They were blissfully oblivious of the mundane chores, at least for a day. It effectively broke the monotony.

Celebrations were spontaneous. Nobody was lagging behind, not even the expatriates living far away from the country. Television channels presented a wide range of programmes, and outside the capital there were the same rallies and concerts that drew a huge audience, despite the heat and humidity. They were elated to leave behind the stale memories of the year that was, as Tagore had so poignantly described in his immortal song on the Bengali New Year.

Pahela Baishakh celebrations are not new, but what has been added to them in the recent years is mass participation. The message here is that people cannot be cut off from their cultural moorings, and any attempt to do so would only invite a more vigorous and determined attempt to uphold cultural identity, as we have witnessed on this occasion. It is time the detractors of our cultural heritage -- some of them being insane enough to go for barbaric violence against it -- learned to live with what has been handed down to us by generations of Bengalees.

Every nation needs such special occasions that can bring its people together in a spirit of bonhomie, friendship and refreshing renewal.

# Tale of a Reckonuddowla and a Rubbani



SHAHNOOR WAHID

## SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Then we have this latest headache called Rubbani. Out there in some remote part of the country this man is rubbing the administration the wrong way. That's Rubbani in Kanshot. He and his people do not want houses in posh areas in the capital. They do not want tons of money or gold. All they want is electricity! Good Lord! Are they going to eat electricity or what?

thing? We did not have to know whether sweetmeats were prepared next to a latrine with adulterated ingredients, poisonous oil and harmful industrial colour. All we care about is whether they taste good. You see, we as consumers are not aware of our health rights and we prefer to remain ignorant about it. The more you know the scarier you get. Ignorance is bliss.

This is Land of Hope, bhaiya and not any country in Europe. We drive cars worth taka two crore but remain as ignorant about basic things as the guy in the slum. And after the entire ruckus, I reckon Reckonuddowla could not totally wreck the morale of the businessmen because tons and tons of bhejal sweetmeats are being sold in the city everyday. Then the chap had to attack the hotels and restaurants famous for delicious biriyani and kebabs! Why, baba? Maybe you are suffering from high cholesterol and blood pressure, but we are not! We grew up eating biriyani everyday and we want to die with biriyani in our mouth.

In fact, we would love to choke

in it and die. Biriyani is our national delicacy. From wedding to Qulkhani we serve biriyani to the guests. We do not care how and where the food is cooked. We do not care how many biriyani have taken how many people to their graves prematurely; we must go on consuming the food with full gusto. No, Reckonuddowla's reckless adventures did not stop at the kitchens in the city. This time he sniffed his way in to some clinics and health centres and launched a frontal attack on the poor guys who were simply trying to make some quick bucks by selling outdated kidney dialysis fluid, saline and blood.

What's the harm if that ensures painless deaths of the unsuspecting patients? That's like "death in comfort." Isn't that better than dying violently on the roads and rivers or in public meetings? But, this chap would not listen to any logic or reason. He would not let people die peacefully, on a bed, with a fan overhead and some nurses standing nearby. He has even ordered the police to arrest the manager of a clinic for selling the stuff. Now, everyone is mad --

mishtiwallas, hotelwallas, chanachurwallas, ice-creamwallas and clinicwallas. They want Reckonuddowla's scalp.

So, this explains the content of a press release that is sitting on my table since yesterday. It says that in order to counter Reckonuddowla's sniffing surprises the affected traders are going to form an association. They have named it the Association of Bhejalwallas. They want to come out boldly this time in one platform claiming that so long they have been doing their business under the full protection of the local police and goons from the ward commissioners' office. They have been paying huge amounts of money as "chanda" (monthly toll) to these people to keep their business going.

So, they are going to protest. It is their democratic right. The association people have already started to contact people here and there, you know where, to take the matter with the high-ups. They want to take steps before more Reckonuddowlas are born to right the age-old wrongs in this country. They are confident they would get

the support from some powerful people in this noble mission. So, Reckonuddowla bhaiya, it seems your days are numbered.

Then we have this latest headache called Rubbani. Out there in some remote part of the country this man is rubbing the administration the wrong way. That's Rubbani in Kanshot. He and his people do not want houses in posh areas in the capital. They do not want tons of money or gold. All they want is electricity! Good Lord! Are they going to eat electricity or what?

The administration is angry with them. Very, very angry. So, every now and then simple villagers of Kanshot are being shot dead by the police for demanding electricity. Some months back ten people were shot dead. The week before it was four people. Then last week it was again four to six people.

In fact, the entire police academy has been temporarily shifted there by the administration for target shooting practice. Shooting at inanimate objects at chanmaris (firing ranges) can be very boring indeed, therefore, they are now taking aim at moving targets -- the expendable humans.

"Footush ... sir ... one down ... sir ... one down! Footush ...sir one more down ... sir ... one more down! How exciting! But, sir, how strange! The colour of their blood is red! How strange! Are those humans, sir? Shut up, constable and let me take aim. I have to take at least two down otherwise what shall I tell my son?"

Well, friend, does it sound preposterous? But this is the truth

out there in Kanshot. And all this is happening because of this chap called Rubbani who has the audacity to disturb the administration for a lowly thing like electricity. The man could negotiate now with the powerful people and go home a happy and rich man. He does not have to tell his people anything about it.

Join the right kind of people and be rich, man, awfully rich. This is the chance of a lifetime. The Kanshot people will forget about their dead kin soon and hail you as a big leader once you join the powerful and return home in a large car. They would love to be covered by the dust of your car, as it would speed away towards the capital, to your new villa in the city.

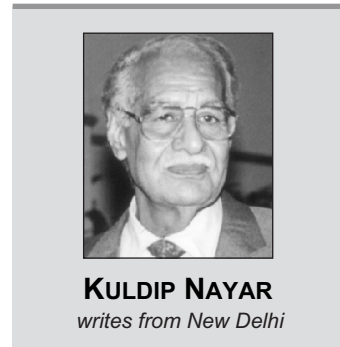
Think of it, Rubbani. For your information, this is the story of most of our popular, firebrand leaders. Most of them came with one lungi and had no place to stay in the capital. Now they have numerous pairs of foreign-made suits, ties, and shoes. Today you will find all them in the most expensive residential blocks, well protected, and far away from the people.

Back home, the hungry, unprotected people will trudge along the trail of poverty just as their ancestors did."

The letter from my friend in Land of Hope ended here.

Shahnoor Wahid is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star.

# Charioting the course of hate



KULDIP NAYYAR

writes from New Delhi

## BETWEEN THE LINES

Akbar does not harangue or lecture to make the point about the sense of accommodation. He quietly tells us how solicitous the Muslims were about the Hindus' belief in caste. The former purchases "savories for the Hindus" from a Hindu sweetmeat shop.

An era of sensitivity, the book traces from times immemorial. Can Advanis and Rajnath Singhs ever imbibe that spirit? If they do not and continue to chip away at the country's institutions like pluralism, they would be responsible for the harm to the society. They should understand that there can be no democracy without secularism.

Pradesh and Rajasthan with the set program of destroying every bit of commonality. The Rajasthan government has gone a step further and armed itself with an anti-conversion law to forcibly sideline the small minority of Christians from the mainstream.

I am told that at one stage Atal Behari Vajpayee was not happy over reviving yatras, probably realizing that they have served their "purpose." Advani even made Vajpayee's skepticism public. But then Vajpayee is atal (firm) only in name. He changes his mind when he finds the RSS and its coterie in the BJP are opposed to his thinking.

It is widely known that he wanted to remove Narendra Modi after what he as the chief minister did to Gujarat. Vajpayee dropped the idea when the RSS told him not to disturb Modi. Instead, Vajpayee attacked the Islamic countries at his next stop in Goa.

That Vajpayee has blessed Advani and Rajnath Singh does not

mean that yatras have come to acquire better credentials. It only confirms that Vajpayee is a chip off the old block. He or, for that matter, his party has given yet another proof, if it was needed, that they are bent upon destroying the secular ethos of India.

Only in whipping up sentiments against Muslims does the BJP see its future in election. It feels it has a chance in the country if it can divide it on religious lines as the pre-partition Muslim League did.

The country has withstood attacks on its secular ethos in the past. It will do so again. What disappoints me is that at a time when India requires all attention to grapple with the ill-effects of development at the cost of social justice, the BJP is resurrecting the Frankenstein of communalism. It does not mind even if the country goes to pieces in the process.

The BJP should realize that it is already losing its base. Advani and Rajnath Singh cannot retrieve a party which wants to take India

back to the middle-ages. When it came to power at the centre, it was not because people returned the party in election but because some regional secular parties jettisoned their ideology to join the BJP government for loaves of office.

The situation has changed now. State leaders like Mulayam Singh in UP and Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh believe that they can capture power at New Delhi by amalgamating with other regional leaders. The BJP is ruled out on yet another count: the crucial Left will back only those regional parties which have no truck with the BJP. The next parliament may be dominated by regional parties, some of which have seen the BJP in its true colours.

As for yatras, the response has been poor because an average Hindu is not taken in by the propaganda that the minorities will swamp him. The BJP has played the mandir card too often, much to the exasperation of people. In the last general election what hit the

party was the countryside's abhorrence over changes in the fields of education, culture, and information.

The worst was the distortion of history. The BJP does not realize how deep the roots of pluralism in the country are. The latest book, Blood Brothers, by M.J. Akbar, an eminent journalist and author, has pointed this out.

His is a saga of an Indian Muslim family, a story of three generations. He brings out boldly and objectively the innate strength of the subcontinent's common heritage. It is not one culture, not one language but a myriad of cultures and languages. Their accommodative living has made what India is -- open, tolerant and cohesive.

Akbar's span is wide. He explores Islam and Hinduism which mould lives in India and impress their image on the history of times. The book deals with religion as a living element in today's culture, not as a museum piece. Akbar's book tells us how Hindus and Muslims believe in one Creator and that the author's grandfather "had not traveled too far when he was converted" from Hinduism to Islam.

Both religions have so much in common: "The supreme God of the Vedas is Brahma. Brahma has no form; Allah also has no form. The Hindu philosophy of mimansa says that idols are only a means to assist the mind towards Brahma. The Hindu seeks release from life in nirvana, I seek assimilation in Allah. Both sufi and sanyasin reach God through meditation.

The Hindu's kravana is my

sama, we both listen; his manana is my muraqaba, we both obey; his nididhyanasana is my tawajjuh, we both contemplate. The buddhi of the Brahmin is my ilm; we both learn; his jnana is my marafat, we both seek emancipation through knowledge. What you call maya (illusion), I call alam-i-khyal, the world of fancy."

Akbar underlines the spirit of tolerance that has woven Hindu and Muslims into a mosaic that mirrors different thoughts while keeping it one.

Take a small passage from his book: "Dinner was placed before the guests; biryani for Muslims and dishes of savouries for the Hindus purchased from a Hindu sweetmeat shop. It was the best available."

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An era of sensitivity, the book traces from times immemorial. Can Advanis and Rajnath Singhs ever imbibe that spirit?

If they do not and continue to chip away at the country's institutions like pluralism, they would be responsible for the harm to the society. They should understand that there can be no democracy without secularism.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

# TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

## Expatriates need their own MP

The economy of Bangladesh depends mostly on the money sent by Probashi people living in the Middle East, America, Australia and Europe. So it is time for the nation to give them the opportunity to have a parliament member. Expatriates from Bangladesh should be given voting right in the coming general election to choose their own representative (MP) in the National Assembly to represent their interests. It will improve the image of Bangladesh as a developing country in the world.

There must be two reserve seats in the parliament for the Expatriates.

One MP from Europe, America, Australia, and Canada and one MP from the Middle East.

1. All Bangladeshis living in foreign countries must register themselves

with the respective Bangladesh embassies.

2. Candidates must put their CV, experiences and references

online with scanned copies of their educational certificates and experiences.

3. Candidates must not be allowed to represent any political party in Bangladesh; politically they must be neutral. Their main duty will be to represent the interest of Expatriates in Bangladesh like investment, housing, public relation, travel; to advise the government on job possibilities for Bangladeshis in a foreign country; to help Bangladeshi students to study in a foreign university, and to help the Expatriates who would like to come back to Bangladesh permanently.

I would like to request our Bangladeshi expatriates to make a list of good ideas and suggestions about this proposal.

**Dr. Farid Majumder**  
Darmstadt, Germany

## Elitism and civil society

Before a civil society can be credible, it must ensure the participation of majority of our people. It is very important to hold meetings in

places where people of all walks of life would have access, and not have your gatherings in places like Sheraton Hotel. Venue is very important to inculcate a spirit of non-elitism and populism. As you probably know that a typical Bangladeshi farmer with his lungi and kurta (Punjabi) does not even have access to Sheraton Hotel. Nor does he, with such attire have access to clubs of Dhaka where important members of civil society routinely hobnob.

At the moment in Bangladesh elitism is a very pernicious problem and even people with populist rhetoric are elitist down inside. In spite of pre-eminence of agriculture in our society, village origin is thought to have a lower status compared to urban origin. In contrast to meritocratic societies such as US, family origin rather than talent is accorded more respect in Bangladesh. Although age and seniority is given respect sometimes, in order to cash in such respect one has to be a member of at least the middle class. Peasants, factory workers,

garment workers etc are not shown any respect whatsoever by members of the affluent elite class and are cynically exploited through mere egalitarian slogan-mongering. This behaviour is not specific to any particular party but is common to all. Democratic practices such as removing a political party from power, fair elections, alone would not change such inequalities. A protracted campaign sustained over a long time would be needed to make our rich and powerful understand a minimum code of civil behaviour.

Thus all ideas and programmes coming from the urban elites of the city will fail unless they are filtered through the enthusiasm and participation of the common people of our country. Only a drastic and explicit change in mindset can accomplish that.

At the moment the widespread un-civil behaviour towards the majority of the country makes a mockery of the idea of a civil society.

I appeal to them to take measures to display their pro-

people intentions by concrete examples and not just well-meaning pronouncements. We must have a citizens' charter for according minimum dignity to all our people, irrespective of their financial status or family origin. Unless such democratisation and true emancipation occurs, all other concerns of the civil society would have a hollow ring to it.

**Abed Chaudhury**  
On e-mail

## Hospital facing water shortage!

For the last few weeks there is acute shortage of water in the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) Hospital.

A hospital should be the cleanest of all places. Hence I wonder how the hospital authorities maintain the cleanliness of the hospital when there is no water.

Also it is strange to me that people are not protesting against this.

Such kind of acute shortage of water in a large hospital is not

expected even in the most corrupt country. Let us not forget that sometimes silence is crime.

**Dr. Mahboob Hossain**  
Associate Professor  
The University of Asia Pacific  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

## Martyr Matiur's remains

I draw your attention to the report on "Family hopes for state honour for martyr Matiur's remains", by your staff correspondent on Sunday April 9, 2006

It is indeed a move in the right direction, that the future generation of the country should learn to respect and honour the national hero. And to be able to do so, the memorial plaque for such national hero should be located in such an area that everyone is able to go and pay his/her tribute to him. By such acts of reverence, we learn to respect, and earn the respect of others for our motherland, Bangladesh.

However, the appeal to resurrect the mortal remains of the

martyr is now being made by gone other than the "wife," shown in the picture on page 2 of your newspaper. It is now over three decades that such a realisation and the family's hope for state honour to the hero's remains is being announced. Would it then be not more befitting that this same appeal is made by a conscious citizen of the country?

And as your newspaper has given the subject a front page coverage, it follows that it is an important subject and deserves serious consideration.

**Farida S**  
On e-mail

## "Import of vehicles from India"

Mr. Thomas Gomes Bhura wrote about import of vehicles from India on 6 April 2006. His idea about saving foreign exchange is good and he wished that our economists may devise a strategy to import Indian cars without compromising our relationship

with Japan and widening the trade gap between Bangladesh and India. I have studied about automobiles of different countries of origin. The thing is Indian cars are cheap to buy but their maintenance and repair costs are comparatively higher than Japanese cars. In the long run, the owner has to pay a big amount to keep the car running. Those taxi-cab owners and drivers who have Indian cars are the biggest victims in this matter. They buy cabs at a low price but ultimately they have to pay much more than the actual price. On the other hand, Japanese cars (both reconditioned and brand new) are well made, durable and reliable. They have low maintenance cost and have higher fuel economy. Most Japanese cars run on Electronic Fuel Injection system which reduces the emission of Greenhouse gases.

**Tanvir Ahmed**  
BRAC University