

Does the World Take Too Many Holidays?

by Nicholas Cole

Western holiday patterns. India observes 12 public holidays a year, mainly comprising Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh festivals. Famous among them are Dussehra (October 17) and Diwali (the November 5 Festival of Light).

Having a secular outlook, Indian people also happily down tools over Christmas and Easter, and they never neglect Independence Day (August 15), or Mahatma Gandhi's anniversary (October 2) or Republic Day (January 26).

In the European community, Portugal enjoys the highest number of public holidays — 14 — yet its business and professional people count among the most conscientious anywhere. Many are still in their offices at midnight.

Joint second with 13 public holidays each are Spain and Germany. Then come Greece (12) and Denmark (11) — singularly including two "afternoon" holidays annually, and hard-working France (also 11), where executives pride themselves on eleven-and-a-half-hour working days.

Belgium awards itself 10 public holidays annually, Italy nine days. Holland, another nation of near-workaholics, is content with seven public holidays.

The Dutch would probably resist pressure to raise the total as vigorously as more diligent Australians are trying to reduce theirs.

— GEMINI NEWS

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Pressure is mounting in parts of the world for a revision of public holiday systems. Opponents claim these have become more of a nuisance than a benefit and the Australians say they are aggravating their current recession. Yet the trend seems to be in the other direction.

British bank holiday.

He reckons "most British workers would prefer to do without statutory holidays — except at Christmas and New Year — and instead have the days credited to their regular holidays."

As people like a "spread" of

leisure time, this is highly arguable. But if it is what Brits want — and Johnson suggests a voters' referendum to decide the issue — then it would contradict the global trend to more rather than fewer holidays (the word derives from "holy day," the original day of

rest devised by ancient Israelites).

Nowhere is this trend more evident today than in post-perestroika Soviet Union, where citizens of several republics, including Russia itself, are demanding Easter be reintroduced to the basic list of seven public holidays a year.

Two, notably Army Day and the UN-backed International Women's day, take place during the first week of May alone. Servicemen get extra days. Everyone has two days off on November 7 and 8 to commemorate the 1917 Revolution.

Although the United States is more work-minded, it is not averse to supplementing its network of federal legal public holidays, which now extends to 11 days annually and incorporates Martin Luther King Day (January 15) in memory of the civil rights leader who was assassinated in 1968.

Other important holidays, which individual states have the right to ignore, are Independence Day (July 4) and Thanksgiving (4th Thursday in November), when the Pilgrim Fathers' first harvest is recalled in family gatherings and turkey dinners. It is cherished as the least commercialist public holiday.

Contrary to standard practice in most other Christian countries, neither December

26 nor Easter Monday count as official days off.

China is likewise frugal with its public holidays. There are just four, including May Day and National Day (October 1), marking the proclamation of the Communist People's Republic 41 years ago.

By contrast, Japan, with 14 holidays a year, appears almost profligate in the matter of time off granted for political, religious or social reasons — until one remembers that people take only two weeks' annual summer holiday, one-third to a half below the average in other industrialised countries.

Major public holidays celebrate everything from the coming of spring (March 20) and Constitution Memorial Day (May 3) to children's day (May 5) — "Couples are not really considered to be couples till they have a child," a government spokesman comments — and the Emperor's birthday (December 23).

While May 1 is not an official holiday, many firms close for the day — and their staff go off on widely popular fishing or relative-visiting trips.

In Middle East countries the most significant holiday is the four-day one that customarily follows Ramadan, the month of fasting by day. The same applies in parts of North Africa, but most countries within the continent copy



An Appeal

The Daily Star appeals to all its readers, advertisers and patrons to contribute generously to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund, to offer the fullest co-operation to all relief agencies and to help the victims of the natural calamity which has hit Bangladesh.

Two Welcome Decisions

The government has taken two very timely decisions. One relates stopping all kinds of official feasts and illumination and a request made to the citizens to likewise shun feasts and illuminations for some time. The other decision is to observe a National Mourning Day today in memory of those killed and lost during Monday night's elemental swoop on 47 southern upazilas. We welcome both the decisions.

It will be in utter bad taste to let any sign of ostentation in any area of national life to be manifest at a time like this. The shadow of colossal death and even more suffering in the southern districts is over all of us of this nation. One can now go for feasting and other expressions of mirth and jubilation only after he has taken complete leave of his senses.

The official announcement in this regard ties this with a hope of practising austerity for some time in deference, it is clear, to Monday night's tragedy in the south.

It may as well have been prompted by consideration of saving money by refraining from avoidable spending, particularly spending on things that go ill with the time.

Bangladesh should have for long been, as a matter of normal practice, observing austerity in both public and private life. The onus of setting examples in this lay on the successive governments in which all of them failed with a will. If the Monday disaster has now occasioned a much delayed recourse to sanity in matters of governmental — and even private — spending, let it be with us until we shall have, say, cut our poverty and hunger by one-half and boosted literacy two times over.

It is expecting too much that the savings made on cancelled feasts and illuminations would help succour the surviving victims in the off-shore region in any significant way. The ban on those comes more as a gesture — and a very weighty gesture — symbolic of the sense of great grief and sympathy we are supposed to feel at this moment of national tragedy. We expect the gesture to grow to its full potential of graduating into a national attitude involving the whole people and their multifarious organisation including the government — one which will serve us long and stand us firm in times of tribulation that are sure to come on our way to reaching a kind of national fulfilment.

The announcement of National Mourning Day should prove a step in the right direction. Although both the print and the electronic media are doing much to impress the many facets of the tragedy in which hundreds of thousands may have died as if in one fell stroke — and national wealth lost to the tune of at least 3000 crore Taka — on the minds of our people, it is feared that for most of us all this ending up in a reaction of feeling sorry and little beside. The National Mourning Day has been designed to make people sit up and think of how best to be of any help in the situation.

We again welcome both the decisions and wish them success.

Time to Catch Up

Shobar Jonno Shikha, or education for all, is probably one of the most well-intentioned slogans ever adopted by the government of this country. But, however well-meaning, slogans have a tendency to turn into cruel hoaxes, unless meaningful initiatives are taken to realise the ideal behind them. Today, right on the doorstep of the 21st century, position of women in education remains similar to their status in society in general — unequal, and subordinate to men.

The situation, a legacy of centuries-old prejudices bred by social and religious bigotry, is fast becoming an anachronism. Women constitute nearly half the total population, and are beginning to play a major role in the development process despite all the odds. But anachronism or not, a jaundiced view of women's role in society continues to dominate. Initiatives to alter the situation at the state or non-government levels, are few and far between.

Paradoxically, there is all-round recognition that without full participation of women in the socio-economic-political life of the country, neither development nor democracy can be fully achieved. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, it is a woman's right to be able to fully realise her potential as an individual.

The key to unlock women's collective potential as a socio-economic powerhouse is education. By now the link between education and development has unquestionably been established. But a society cannot get very far down the progress path by concentrating on giving proper education to only half its members. Unfortunately, social prejudices continue to put up obstacles on women's path. Most families do not even consider it worthwhile to spend much on a girl's education, preferring to marry her off on completing school, with little or no chance of higher education.

Such a situation cannot be changed unless society undergoes a radical transformation in its attitude towards women. To create public opinion against such prejudices, awareness has to be raised, beginning at the earliest stage, at school. If necessary, the national curriculum has to be altered to delete all depiction of women as having no other role than those of housewives and mothers. The younger generation must be pointed out, in the gentlest way possible, the utter folly and unfairness of current thinking. At the same time, education for women has to become a priority area. Women should also be given greater incentives to become teachers, including reserved posts, in order to attract more girls to schools and colleges. Instead of special schools for girls, more mixed schools should be encouraged, with an increased quota for girls. A bit of positive discrimination would not go amiss, since women have several thousand years to catch up on.

India being Pressed on A-Bomb Option

Prakash Chandra writes from New Delhi

THE increasing fear that the United States might use nuclear weapons against Saddam Hussein's Iraq had triggered a powerful lobby to pressure the Indian government to manufacture nuclear bombs. Leading the pack is General K. Sundarji, former Chief of the Army Staff, who asserts peace in India depends on New Delhi going nuclear.

In newspaper interviews, he suggested a three-way pact between China, Pakistan and India for a minimum nuclear deterrent. But General Sundarji, who is known as a nuclear hawk, asserts quite openly: "I think we should say categorically that we have this capability. It is going to be a defensive capability."

He believes that there is nothing to be ashamed about having a deterrent. For, "we are not going to make first use of it ever." But independent observers believe that New Delhi arming itself with nuclear weapons would enforce her image as a regional bully.

Those who support the bomb explain that once India declares her faith in the bomb, she will never behave like a bully and Pakistan will respect India for that.

A former Defence Minister, Mr. K.C. Pant, had also come out with a strong plea for reviewing New Delhi's stand on nuclear weapon. More recently, former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has demanded that India should review its nuclear options.

Earlier, in a letter to Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar, Mr. Gandhi made the point that the escalation in the tone of the US on the use of the nuclear option in Iraq should alert all the countries, especially India, to its fallouts and make preparations for self-defence.

Mr. Gandhi said: "We would be among the worst victims of any resort to nuclear weapons in the West Asian theatre. First, the removal of the taboo in one blow would destroy mental defences against the

outbreak of nuclear war that have been built up in human minds, thanks in no small measure to the pioneering endeavour of Pandit Nehru and the non-aligned movement....

.... Any such development would leave us with hardly any option but to convert our nuclear weapons capability into nuclear weapons capacity."

Not to be left behind, the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is campaigning vigorously for the manufacture of atomic bombs. It feels that India is defenceless against Pakistan and China as those countries have already developed nuclear weapon capacity and China has enough bombs in its basement to destroy any potential enemy.

This had led to a fierce debate in newspapers and public

Congress panel investigating nuclear proliferation in South Asia, that only a nuclear test by Pakistan could incite India to assemble its weapons and move promptly to a test which would probably involve a thermonuclear device.

According to Mr. Levanthal, India accepts the reality of Pakistan's deterrent. But it is hardly in New Delhi's interest to trigger a nuclear arms race with Pakistan beyond the present levels.

Other American officials have warned that a total cutoff of aid to Pakistan might prompt India to go through with its own nuclear programme.

One US politician strongly

clear research and other activities.

As an analyst says, "For a long time now care has been taken by the nuclear establishment to shroud everything in secrecy. This has hardened belief that India has something to hide."

The fact of the matter is that both India and Pakistan have nuclear capacity and it is better for both sides to admit that they have bombs, but that it is not necessary to use them in any conflict. Independent observers believe that India has adequate scientific ability and skill to develop a delivery system for atomic weapons.

It all started with India carrying out a peaceful nuclear

other side. Recently, some Russian newspapers have raised the question — if India's programme is for peaceful purposes, then why this secrecy? Why should it not be open for nuclear inspection?

The reason is that nuclear pundits in New Delhi have always opposed the inspection system. And the logic advanced is that the major nuclear powers have not allowed the inspection of their facilities.

However, the recent agreement between the US and the Soviet Union for limiting nuclear weapons and their destruction under the umbrella of disarmament has not encouraged India to rethink its priorities.

Some experts are now suggesting that it would be far more sensible to agree to the

ment, refinement, deployment, use or threat of use of nuclear weapons.

But all this requires a strong political will. Fascist forces which are on the rise by generating communal tensions for winning the ensuing elections are unlikely to accept any negotiations with Pakistan and China, who they consider permanent adversaries.

Clearly, a temporary government, which is not sure of its moorings, cannot do anything fundamental in the field of nuclear peace. All they can do is to toe the line propounded by Mr. Gandhi.

Besides, there is the question of the cost which is an important factor. Some analysts have estimated that India cannot really afford the manufacture of nuclear weapons as it might cost 15,000 million rupees (US\$1,200 million) to continue even the present programme.

Thus, if India were to go in for a full-fledged nuclear programme involving the actual deployment of a small number of nuclear weapons carrying nuclear warheads the cost will rise to an astronomical level.

It is speculated that a very large sum will be needed, probably one-half of the existing defence budget of some 200,000 million rupees (US\$16,000 million). Clearly, this cannot be borne by a weak economy already crippled by rising inflation and the Gulf war fallout.

The Bharatiya Janata Party, which is not bothered to much about the national economy, has not the foggiest idea of what it will mean in terms of damage to economic interests.

Most of the hawks are in the lotus land of ignorance. Somehow, they believe that you can sacrifice everything for the so-called national interest, imperiling the future of this generation and millions of children yet to be born.

— *Depthnews Asia*

The nuclear establishment shrouds everything in secrecy and has hardened belief that India has something to hide

forums on the desirability of developing nuclear bomb capacity.

Several analysts like Mr. K. Subramanyam, a former director of the Institute for Defence Research and Analysis, expressed the view that New Delhi had no options left but to go in for atomic weapons.

This view has hardened after the development of a family of missiles — air-to-air and ground-to-air weapons — which can carry nuclear warheads. Indeed, one of the weapons — Akash — is said to be almost parallel to the Patriot missile with the same capability. Most of the missiles will be in production over the next five years.

Experts have doubted the wisdom of such a nuclear arms race in South Asia. According to Paul Levanthal, president of the Nuclear Control Institute, "It is not in India's interest to trigger a nuclear arms race with Pakistan even if there was a popular outcry in the country for such action."

Mr. Levanthal has told a US

believes that India has a decided advantage in numbers and sophistication of warheads. But Pakistan has a credible deterrent. He says that South Asia has become the first region of the developing world in which principal rivals have achieved mutual nuclear deterrents.

Another well-known American nuclear analyst, Leonard Spector, has said that since Pakistan's security concerns are focused on India, the overall objective of Washington's policy must be to reduce the danger of nuclear war on the subcontinent.

According to an Australian expert, India already has nuclear bombs. It has the capacity to build 15 to 30 nuclear weapons annually, according to the expert.

India's nuclear facilities, with the exception of a couple of power stations, are not open to international inspection. International experts suspect that no adequate information is given either to people here or to the outside world about nu-

explosion in 1974 for scientific purposes. The world, for good reasons, did not believe Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assertions at that time that India is not developing a nuclear capability.

Mrs. Gandhi was keen to establish India as a nuclear power and suddenly a weak and impoverished Third world country became a member of the nuclear club.

"This satisfied Mrs. Gandhi's vanity. But it had disturbing consequences. The Pakistan Prime Minister, the late Z. A. Bhutto, declared that his people would eat grass rather than not meet India's challenge.

Another disturbing sign is that India has consistently rejected moves and suggestions for a nuclear weapons-free zone in South Asia. Translated in practical terms, it would have meant an India-Pakistan pact renouncing the nuclear options.

One important reason is that neither India nor Pakistan is willing to allow inspection of its nuclear programme by the

Pakistani move to have mutual inspections. There should be exchange of authentic information on each other's nuclear activities. The consideration of national sovereignty is altogether illogical.

"It should be possible to reach a reasonable level of verification that neither country has actually assembled a nuclear weapon and tested a sub-assembly or auxiliary technology or has taken advanced steps to deploy weapons," one analyst says.

Other experts have argued that the recent Brazil-Argentina agreement, which gives the two countries the right to inspect mutual facilities, could be a model for the Indian subcontinent. Besides, technology is available for verification of nuclear facilities as in the case of the Americans and the Soviets.

As India no longer considers China an adversary, it should be possible to negotiate both with Pakistan and China to conclude a treaty which would prevent the develop-

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Golden fleece for Bangladesh

Sir, On the part of Bangladesh, the 11th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Barbados was not just another regular meeting of the former British colonial states that honoured Bangladesh with the speakership on behalf of all visiting ministers and heads of delegation, when the age-old education system in the country is in shambles and the natural urge is to find the Aladin's Majic Lamp to have the

Genie put the pieces back together again.

Who, where, when, and how, if ever possible, are all awaiting a miracle probably for the right time to happen. But, the (undesired) questions keep bouncing back up, "who'll tie the bell (around the cat's neck)?", or "when'll the Pied Piper arrive (to get rid of the rats)?", or

Over at the conference, she "expressed the hope that the Commonwealth would be able to tilt the balance in favour of peace, progress, and development". Someone has rea-

doubt! But, someone must wonder, "Where on earth is the Golden Fleece anyway?"

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Education Policy

Sir, After independence of Bangladesh we, in this part of the world, wanted everything to be in Bangla. The education policy adopted by the successive governments after the independence produced half-educated persons who had no access to the books, periodicals and journals mostly in English.

came down to 37 per cent in 1988-89. In the case of students with urban backgrounds the percentage was 31 in 1982. This had gone upto 63 per cent in 1988-89."

The reason is not unknown: In Urban areas English was not discarded but in the rural areas it was shunned as a taboo.

Let us shun hypocrisy for our better future. We appeal to the new parliament (both treasury bench and the opposition) to repeal the Act II of 1987 and to re-introduce the education policy prior to 1982 so that a student from a school of Teknaf may compete with the foreign or English-medium educated children in future administration of the country.

Sarker Nasreen Nahar and others, Ibrahimpur, Dhaka.