

Happy New Year

Today, the Bengali New Year's Day, is a national day. It could as well be called the Culture Day for it indeed celebrates the Bengalee people's love and a sense of deference for their culture. But why should we need a national holiday to mark that? It is so because, Pahela Boishakh or the Bengali New Year's Day occupies a special place in the making of this nation-state more than a simple culture day could stand for. This day could more aptly be called the day of 'National Awakening,' which phenomenon did so much to kindle in the hearts of the Bengali people a sense of national identity, completely different from and opposed to what the colonialist Pakistan would have us believe in.

This year's heralding of the new year is in a way very special. We observe today the 25th anniversary or silver jubilee of the founding of Pahela Boishakh as one of the days central to our national life. In 1967 it started in an inostentatious way at what is now so famous as the Ramna Bawtomool. The leader of the cultural resistance against Pakistan, Chhayanaut, seemed to have electrified the nascent sense of Bengalee nationalism by adding a new dimension to a day that traditionally was observed by the shopkeepers alone as a date for opening fresh books of account.

The particular way in which it has since been celebrated at the Bawtomool and followed elsewhere throughout the nation helped separate it from all such festivity in other nations, particularly western. Closeness to nature in the purity of the dawn breeze of Boishakh, immortalised by Tagore in his songs, — and the elevating melodies equally pure in their raga-based compositions invoking the new sunrise, help make the mind start negotiating a fresh yearly lease of earthly travails with a sense of positive tranquillity. This sets the tone for the day. How one wished this also set such a healthy tone for the whole of the new year!

To this has been lately added the Boishakhi Mela, a more traditional mode of marking a public event, thanks to the initiative taken by a government agency. Although the racket created by the 'mela' — because of its joyous carnival temper — cuts heavily into the serene beginning of the day, a yearly fair of country handicrafts, specially earthenware, more than makes up the loss. Interestingly enough, this mela is helping revive many endangered and near-extinct village delicacies by bringing a veritable country fair to town.

Although Boishakhi is a festival for the most parts of Asia, here we celebrate it as the day beginning the 'Bangla Sal' (Bengali Calendar) otherwise called the Fasali Shon or the harvest calendar — introduced by Akbar the Great to facilitate his kingdom's revenue collection.

While wishing our compatriots and all Bengali-speaking people abroad who, no doubt, are joining us in our celebration of the day, a happy new year shot with strivings for all that is good for humanity in general, we specially want in the new year our citizens to cover important new ground in collective enterprise in the task of elimination of poverty and illiteracy as well of setting new milestones in literature, education and the sciences. Let Pahela Boishakh become a day of true national awakening rather than be an unmeaning symbol of it devoid of both worldly and spiritual achievement.

Drought and Crop Loss

While the entire country is smarting under scorching heat wave, in the north, in particular, the situation is precarious. Under the spell of a drought, the northern region stands to face an economic disaster of astounding proportion. Reports reaching from Kurigram, Bogra, Rangpur, Sirajganj and even Satkhira cannot be more distressing so far as the production of crops is concerned. A report carried by this newspaper yesterday says that 40 per cent paddy plants of Irrig-Boro in greater Rangpur district have already been damaged by the persistent drought there. The story of Satkhira is no better. For Bogra, the proportion of such crop loss is estimated at 40 to 50 per cent. In Kurigram, the loss is yet to be ascertained (data are being collected). But the figure for this severely affected area is expected to be no less appalling.

The calamity, though partly natural, has in it a fair share of human contribution as well. The fact that loadshedding together with diesel shortage has further worsened the situation is evident from all the reports on the subject. Lack of foresight and advance planning is what appears to be the principal culprit in pushing the situation to such a fringe. Farmers standing in long queue and returning home without diesel is not a pleasant sight.

Such things are surely avoidable if the administration takes into reckoning the need of farmers in unusual circumstances or emergency. How does one explain the diesel shortage — specially when the weather forecast was conclusively for no rain? To make the matter more complicated perhaps, the power supply has become equally uncertain. The point is that the crop loss is going to seriously affect the country's economy which has been on a continuous downside for a long time. But, no doubt, the loss could be minimised if only timely action could be taken by the government.

Meanwhile, State Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation, Lutfur Rahman Khan, informed the Jattya Sangsad that a total of 21,340 metric tons of wheat was allocated for 432 special projects under the Food for Work Programmes in this drought season. This, we understand, is only going to help the poorer section of the rural population at a time when food is scarce in the countryside. But if the irrigation is hampered the way it is being done now, many more people will face starvation in the coming days. Nor is it wise to disturb the local production because that sets into motion a number of inimical forces that eat into the very vital of the national productive system in the long run. It is, therefore, necessary to develop a permanent supporting mechanism for agriculture capable of coping with emergency.

PRIME MINISTER'S WASHINGTON VISIT: ONE VIEW

Fostering a Spirit of Goodwill Best Serves Interests

by Dr Ashrafur Hasan

The willingness to support the foreign policy objectives of the United States was communicated this time in the form of a pledge to cooperate with the US in promoting a more peaceful and prosperous world. For a country such as Bangladesh, it might, indeed, be advisable, in dealing with a superpower, to foster the dynamics of cooperation.

THE recent visit by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to the United States, appears to be quite successful. The Bush-Khaleda meeting was the first of its kind and the signing of an agreement to provide food aid to Bangladesh under the PL-480 programme and Bush's three-million-dollar pledge for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh indicate, albeit indirectly, American willingness to promote the process of both development and democracy in Bangladesh.

In response to Bush's positive overtures, Begum Zia, in meeting members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, expressed appreciation for the bold and imaginative leadership provided by the US in world politics; thanked Americans for the help provided by them during last year's cyclone in Bangladesh; and categorically stated that 'Your help for the poor and distressed around the globe has won universal admiration'. Rarely has Washington, in recent times, received such unqualified admiration from any country of the Third World. In general, and the Muslim bloc, in particular. In this sense, Begum Zia's trip has served to soothe the senses of the US political leadership.

The Bangladeshi willingness to support the foreign policy objectives of the United States — as was obvious during the Gulf crisis of 1991 — was communicated this time, during Begum Zia's visit to the US, in the form of a pledge to

cooperate with the US in promoting a more peaceful and prosperous world. For a country such as Bangladesh, it might, indeed, be advisable, in dealing with a Superpower, to foster the dynamics of cooperation. And, as the above account indicates, this is exactly what Begum Zia attempted — during her recent trip.

Begum Zia did not, however, stop merely 'talking' cooperation and receiving 'dole-outs' in the form of PL-480 funds and assistance for the Rohingya refugees. Access to American markets for Bangladeshi products such as textile exports, etc; assistance in the field of technology transfers on mutually acceptable terms; and other such matters figured prominently in her 'bag of priorities'.

In attempting to evoke a positive response from the US leadership, Begum Zia around that development and democracy went hand in hand. Thus, if the United States was, indeed, serious about fostering the nascent forces of democracy in Bangladesh, Begum Zia cautioned that, despite the sharply reduced power of the erstwhile Soviet Union as a competitor in world politics, Washington could ill-afford to ignore the developmental needs of Bangladesh and other

Third World countries.

The American political elite, in responding to Begum Zia's concerns, clarified that the US does not intend to curtail developmental funds to the Third World. A policy statement such as this should not be interpreted as being indicative of an unqualified American commitment to the development needs of Bangladesh. The assumption implicit in any US assurance of assistance is that the aid-recipient will further, in one form or the other, the national interests of the donor state. Promoting the dynamics of interdependence between Dhaka and Washington is thus, in a unipolar type world, not just important — but critical to the developmental needs of Bangladesh.

President Bush, in his recent meeting with Begum Zia, explicitly thanked Bangladesh for its support during the Gulf War. Bangladeshi contributions to the UN peace-keeping efforts in the Middle East, Cambodia and Namibia were also accorded recognition by the US leadership, and helped to highlight the manner in which Bangladesh could reciprocate for the assistance it receives from Western powers, including the US. Bangladesh can continue to provide legis-

lative support and manpower facilities to both UN and US peace-keeping forces in the Middle East, Asia and elsewhere. In return, the US can supply much-needed economic and technical assistance to Bangladesh. This would permit Bangladesh to effectively employ her untapped natural resources, provide manpower training to her teeming millions and, by facilitating the well-being of the impoverished many, nurture, in the final analysis, the forces of democracy in Bangladesh.

The Bush-Begum Zia meeting proved meaningful primarily because both sides were willing to appreciate each other's strengths and accommodate for each other's needs. While this meeting was primarily characterised by a type of harmony, some issues appear to have remained unresolved. Begum Zia indicated that Bangladesh was unhappy with US textile quotas. These quotas, if removed — or at least relaxed — could facilitate more clothing exports to the US and thereby provide the Bangladeshi textile industry with a much-needed boost. The extent to which Washington is willing to accommodate to our needs in this regard is still somewhat unclear. It can, however, be hoped that, if the US is, indeed, sincere about

promoting both development and democracy in Bangladesh, President Bush would reappraise (without any further delay), the desirability of the quotas imposed upon textile imports.

Promoting other Bangladeshi products such as frozen fish, and creating an awareness within American business circles regarding the potential for investing in Bangladesh, were also attempted by Khaleda Zia. Here again, the outcome is still unclear.

In the realm of military security, it is unlikely that American economic aid and cooperation in the field of trade and commerce would, in the years ahead, further the strategic needs of Bangladesh. This is all the more obvious when it is noted that, in recent times, Washington has responded positively to Delhi's diplomatic overtures. Joint naval exercises between Delhi and Washington appear to be already in the offing — and suggest that, in the decade of the nineties, closer ties will be forged between India and the United States. The establishment of closer ties between these two countries does not, in itself, endanger Bangladesh's security interests. It does, however, imply that Dhaka can ill-afford, at any stage, to risk diplomatic com-

placency vis-a-vis Washington, and that protracted effort on the part of Bangladesh is required to sustain the gains which have accrued from Begum Zia's visit to the US. Also, it is clear that Bangladesh should actively promote the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) idea — thus ensuring that the generation of goodwill between Bangladesh and other South Asian states, (including India) would preclude closer Delhi-Washington ties from becoming a matter of potential concern for Bangladesh. Added to this, it is important for Bangladesh to diligently nurture its links with the OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference) states and to foster cooperation with other countries/regional groupings which have national interests and goals similar to those of Bangladesh.

Fostering a spirit of cooperation and goodwill best serves the long-term national interest and development needs of Bangladesh. In the context of the US, Begum Zia's trip attempted and, to a large extent, achieved such an outcome. In order to capitalise on the current gains, it is important, however, to now continue this process within the framework of SAARC and OIC. Only then, would the objective of facilitating the forces of democracy and engendering sustained economic development have a reasonable chance of success in Bangladesh.

Another view on the visit will be published later

I was Gorbachev before Gorbachev, Says Resilient Jagan

Mohamed Hamaludin writes from Miami

The long-delayed elections in Guyana now look like taking place around mid-year. The winner could be the man who has been in opposition for 28 years and is now 74 — Cheddi Jagan. He first won an election in his country, then a British colony, in 1953. Gemini News Service profiles the resilient politician who was making headlines 40 years ago.



HAPPIER DAYS: Political arch-rivals Cheddi Jagan and President Forbes Burnham a few years before the President's death in 1985

AT 74, Cheddi Jagan is probably the world's most enduring Marxist politician. For 28 years he has functioned as an opposition leader in Guyana, the small former British colony where an absorbing sequel is being played out to the drama of the collapse of communism in Europe.

Much-delayed elections are to be held later this year in this country of about 700,000 people, the only English-speaking nation in South America. Electoral reforms look like ensuring that the vote will be the fairest since at least 1968.

For Jagan, whose political patience rivals that of the biblical Job, victory at last seems tantalisingly within reach. Opinion polls show that his People's Progressive Party (PPP) could win between 54-61 per cent of the vote and topple the ruling People's National Congress (PNC) led by President Desmond Hoyte.

Jagan is the son of Indo-Guyanese parents. His father was an overseer on a sugar estate. Cheddi studied dentistry in the United States and entered politics on his return home. Despite his relatively comfortable status, he was fiercely opposed to British colonial rule.

He became a thorn in the side of London, which feared that as a Marxist he planned to set up a communist regime in the Western hemisphere. That was years before Cuba's Fidel Castro (1959) and Chile's Salvador Allende (1973), the region's two other best-known Marxist leaders.

Concern mounted when Jagan, heading the first popular mass party in Guyana, won election in 1953 under a form of internal self-government.

Only months later Britain — with the active help of the US — threw Jagan out of office, sent troops to the colony and suspended the constitution. Jagan wrote about the bitter experience in his book *Forbidden Freedom*.

He took office again in 1958, when the power was still in the hands of the British Colonial Office, and would have won elections in 1964.

But the first-past-the-post

(winner take all) system of voting was replaced by proportional representation and he lost to his former ally, Forbes Burnham. He has been in opposition ever since.

In another book, he argued that while the West was telling the world that it embraced freedom and parliamentary democracy, it used every means possible to frustrate the wishes of the Guyanese people for him to lead them.

It was not an overstatement. But then, in the depths of the Cold War, Jagan was unique political animal. He saw the abject conditions in which sugar workers lived in their own country and the immeasurable influence of the plantation and mercantile class.

His class consciousness was even more sharply delineated by experiences within his own racial group, the Indo-Guyanese, and his taste of American apartheid, known as segregation.

On a recent visit to Miami he told reporters that after winning a national scholarship to Queen's College, the premier Guyanese state high school, in Georgetown, he stayed with a family that, like him, was Hindu.

class background and where I come from. I don't think I have betrayed my duty, which is to see that social justice is meted out and that we have a caring government."

There is seemingly an oddity in a Marxist politician preparing to win elected office when all around him socialist regimes are crumbling. Jagan sees victory dangling before him because, ironically, the collapse of the very system he believes in has put a greater premium on democracy and the PNC, under Hoyte, Burnham's successor, has moved to satisfy concerns about electoral fairness.

Jagan has another answer: "I was Gorbachev before Gorbachev. A workers' state was set up in the Soviet Union, but after that things went wrong. It was placed under bureaucratic command and democracy was locked out.

But the family was from the Brahmin caste and he was not — so although they had an empty bed, I had to sleep on the floor."

Also, the young Jagan found that while the sections of the monied class could attend Queen's as a matter of course, all others — meaning sons of the working class — had to take a test.

In America, he studied at the predominantly black Howard University in Washington and for a spell, in Chicago. There he met and married Janet Rosenberg, a white American who has stayed at his side all these years through victories and defeats.

Janet Jagan won over many Guyanese because she went with her husband to even the smallest villages, often helping to do household chores, such as bathing the baby. The race-conscious Indo-Guyanese gave her the fond nickname Blue-Eye Bhoubjie (Blue-Eye Sister-in-Law).

Even detractors concede Cheddi Jagan has not wavered from this early commitment to the working class. And he maintains he will not renounce Marxism.

He said in Miami: "I got into politics because of my causing great hindrance in the movement of traffic. Relevant people of the Dhaka City Corporation were told and reminded over phone several times but, as ill luck would have it, no steps appear to have been taken to repair the broken portion of the busy thoroughfare. Although for the last five to six months the road is in a bad state, none from the Corporation took the trouble of visiting the spot or taking any action to remove the difficulty, for which the pedestrians and various modes of traffic are suffering so much.

Since we have failed to break the slumber of the Corporation by approach we find no other alternative than to ventilate the grievance through your esteemed paper, so that urgent attention of the Corporation may be drawn to the above difficulty for early redress.

Sadequr Rahman Arambagh, Dhaka.

Road in bad shape

Sir, On the Motijheel Fourth Lane by the front of Uttara Bank head office leading towards Arambagh, there is a heavy breach on the eastern side of Troycora Building (92, Motijheel) and at the western side of Azad Sporting Club

OPINION

Neglected Northern Region

THE newly elected Government under the leadership of Begum Khaleda Zia, we believe, is keen to develop the less developed regions of the country. During her election campaign in the northern part of the country, she emphasized on setting up of small scale industries. To face drought, she emphasized on the measures like digging canals, rivers, ponds as done by the late President Zia for improving irrigation facilities and connecting deep tube wells with electricity. To remove the bottlenecks faced by the private sector there, the Government, like the past Governments, may declare some concessions in the industrial policy.

Concessions alone in respect of payment of comparatively low rates of taxes, duties, simplification of sanctioning procedure, relaxation of formalities etc., however, may not yield spectacular result. So far as the northern districts are concerned, the past industrial policies failed to achieve a breakthrough in the field of industrialisation. It would be worthwhile to analyse the cause of the past failure.

There is an acute irregularity of supply of electricity. The sooner the continuity of its supply is ensured, the better for the industrialisation. Electricity is now the main source of power here and it is costly. There is no gas. The region needs to be supplied with gas for commercial and domestic consumption.

In the field of communication, the northern districts are the most backward area. Many important places are still deprived of any road-communication. Many of the important roads are in deplorable condition. Similar is the condition of the railway communication. The tele-communication facility within the region also is not

modern. Steps to modernise Mongla Port with storage facilities and improved communication by rail and road, to and from the Port, may help bring about the desired industrialisation. A refinery at Khulna will reduce the cost of petroleum products.

The construction of Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge with broad-gauge railway having provisions for mixed gauge will serve the purpose to the greatest extent. For marketing of agricultural and industrial products, the northern region is totally dependent on Dhaka. In absence of a local market, the economic progress is very slow there. Only Jamuna Bridge can solve it.

The northern region is primarily dependent on agriculture. In respect of sugar and tobacco, the whole country is dependent on the northern region. In respect of paddy, pulse, onion, zinger, more than 65% of the country's requirement is met from this region's produce. Deforestation, particularly due to the absence of gas, aggravates the ecology as well as agricultural problem there. There is an abrupt fall in the underground water level. Drought has been a common phenomenon for 5/6 years. The number of deep tube wells needs to be increased there. And fact drought, water reservoirs need to be built; beels, rivers to be re-excavated besides digging ponds and canals.

The trade, commerce and industry in the northern region are more or less in their infancy. There is as yet no sound footing to have the required amount of subsidies, assistance and protection from various corners. The single chamber perhaps fails to serve the purpose of the less developed region. The Government's latest action to have a

separate chamber for industries at the national level bears testimony to the fact that the single chamber at a certain stage fails to serve the purpose.

In a single chamber, the traders or the people of the developed region have wider scope of claiming and establishing supremacy over that of the less developed region because of their better knowledge, information, communication and public relations. Besides the objective of the two areas i.e. developed and less developed regions are different. The developed area would like to pay more attention on the consolidation, expansion and reorganisation because of its attaining maturity while the less developed area would pay more attention on production, development and guidance because of its lack of experience. It is also substantiated by the recent action of the Government to promote one separate chamber for the industries, because the interests of industry and trade are opposite and thus their divergent views cannot be met from a single chamber.

To remove the obstacles that stand in the way of economic, commercial and industrial development in the less developed region, the feasibility of having a separate Chamber of Commerce and Industries for the less developed region particularly for the northern region may be looked into. Its necessity is felt in view of the decentralisation and the disinvestment policy of the Government. Besides, a separate chamber may play a vital role in helping the Government to remove disparity between northern and eastern parts of the country.

Md. Anwarul Afzal Raminagar, Nappaan

To the Editor...

Electronic media and newspaper

Sir, I was really flattered to find my earlier letter 'Newspaper Holiday' to feature in your column 'My World' of 4th April. Your observations on the electronic media, specially BTV, tempts me to add a little.

To start with allow me to express my appreciation for the glorious role of BTV in telecasting the major sports events like the world cups (both football and cricket) recently. We are indeed grateful.

We, the middle class, lead a life of predictable mediocrity devoid of moments of glory, adventure or achievement. So when a media reflects the same qualities we don't much enjoy. Moreover, mere novelties like me (not the exalted ex-police chief with the same initials) can not create the right mood at the right moment. While the articles of the newspaper can wait for my right mood, the electronic

media has not the same advantage. And often I find myself staring at something which does not appeal. But I only speak for myself, there must be millions who view whatever comes their way. An example is my mother who eagerly waits for the opening time of the BTV programme to let it run till the closing time. The magic box chatters on even in an empty room when she is all around with the domestic chores. To her it is rude to switch-off while there is something on the screen.

M A Haq, West Rajabazar, Dhaka.