

Merry Christmas Merry Christmas Merry Christmas Merry Christmas Merry Christmas

CHRISTMAS

Christmas — a Celebration of Love

by Jerome Sarkar

CHRIStIANS all over the world are going to celebrate Christmas for one more time today, the 25th December, 1992. In the Western countries the preparation for this celebration starts weeks before. The manifestations of the preparations for the feast are quite visible. Big shopping centres are being piled up with materials of decorations, greeting cards, presentations etc. However, in Bangladesh, Christians being a microscopic minority amount 0.3 per cent of the whole population, the same is not that obvious. Anyway, they too prepare for the Christmas.

In this country, beside the Christians, non-Christians too participate in the X-mas parties organised by the renowned clubs and hotels in gorgeous manner.

Christians, in general, celebrate this day with great solemnity, enthusiasm and merriment. They beautify their houses with traditional fervour in a special way. Christmas trees are decorated following the traditions of the westerners. Creches and stars are set in the houses symbolising the birth of Christ. English and local cakes get prominence over other delicacies. Exchange of gifts and new dresses mark the day. Children, the young and the old all pay visits to their relatives and friends for exchanging greetings and asking for blessings.

The Bengali Christians follow an interesting blend of Bangla and English Cultures — while the ladies put on new saris, the men put on English dresses such as suits, ties — the varieties of Bangla pitthas gracefully appear beside English cakes — while shaking hands in English style, seek blessings of the older people in Bangla traditional way.

To celebrate the occasion, the special church service is held at night. Traditionally it would be arranged at midnight but due to a feeling of insecurity, it takes place earlier. The Church interiors are beautified with colourful papers, designs and decoration pieces and towers are illuminated. The youth wings of the churches take initiative in this matter, working together for the celebration gives everybody a special feeling of belongingness and unity. The special choirs highlight the night's function.

Let's take a look at the birth of Christ with some relevances to the Holy Bible. While she was still a virgin she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit (Matthew : 21). Here, she is mother Mary, mother of Jesus Christ. To devout Christian believers, the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is the basic tenet. The Holy Trinity is a mystery and the Christians have unqualified faith in the Holy Trinity. The three is one God. God, the Creator, created the universe, all the living beings, the birds, the amphibians, the divinity. He then created Adam and Eve. The Almighty, the omnipotent and omnipresent has done many mysterious things which are often beyond comprehension of human beings. In the eyes of the believers, nothing is impossible for the Almighty. The universe itself is a great mystery and the Almighty remains the greatest of all mysteries. Miracles still happen. If one believes, for God, everything is possible.

Joseph, by profession a carpenter and his fiancée Maria were living in Nazareth. Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, ordered for a census. Accordingly Joseph with his betrothed moved to Bethlehem in Judea for registering their names. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was obviously pregnant by this time.

(Luke 2:5) Finding no accommodation in the village inns or elsewhere, being disappointed, finally they had to take shelter in a cave which was the place for the sheep and cattle during the night. At the midnight, Maria gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger. Some shepherds were in the fields outside the village guarding their flocks. Suddenly an angel appeared to them and announced, "The saviour the Messiah, the Lord, has been born tonight in Bethlehem" (Luke 2:11). The message of joy spread in no time.

Around that time three wise men arrived in Jerusalem inquiring about the new born King of the Jews "Where is the newborn King of the Jews? For we have seen His Star in far-off eastern lands, and have come to worship him". (Matthew 2:2) "Entering the house where the baby and Mary his mother were, they threw themselves down before him, worshipping. Then they

opened their presents and gave him gold, frankincense and myrrh." (Matthew 2:11) Thus the founder of Christianity came into this world in the most humble way.

According to Christian faith, Christ came to salvage the humanity from the ditch of sins and darkness. He thus worked all through His life for peace and justice and never compromised with injustice and hypocrisy. He once drove away hordes of traders who occupied the temple of Jerusalem, thus he saved religion from becoming traders' commodity. Forgiveness and love was His weapon against enemies. He preached the message of peace, love and justice.

As a sheer consequence, He faced opposition from the Pharisees the then proud and domineering religious leaders but that did not stop him from winning the hearts of the people by love and healing power. Unveiling the hypocritical role of the so-called reli-

gious leaders of the Jews, Jesus confronted boldly the Pharisees and opened a new vista of life for all who accepted Him.

The greatest of all the teachings of Jesus is "Love thy neighbour as thyself." Notably, Christ talks of the **GODD SAMARITAN** as the true neighbour of an individual who forgetting all the differences such as creed, age whatsoever, unconditionally helps his neighbour in time of need. If we try to delve into the prevalent reality, we will find out that lack of love is the cause of all disturbances, unrest, tensions etc. In the absence of love, we are constantly engaged in wars within and without.

"Love each other just as much as I love you" (John 14:34). Jesus made himself humble and washed symbolically the feet of his disciples and taught them to serve others selflessly to become their true leaders. Following the teaching of Jesus, if everyone loves others and the leaders commit to serve their people with true intent of self-sacrifice, peace can be established. Love as has been told and exemplified by Christ, reverberates with the thousand echoes of an eternal message: "Love is very patient and kind, never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud, never haughty or selfish or rude." (1 Cor. 13:4-7,13) of course, it is not so easy to practise the culture of love. It requires lots of teachings, willingness, commitments and efforts to acquire it.

This beautiful world could become a peaceful abode for all if only we could be more sincerely attached to love, do justice to others, be kind to the weak, never deprive the needy and share pleasures and pains with others. The world could be quite a different place. These are no mere statements — they are proven physically, psychologically, mentally and emotionally. The simple finding of science is that mere emotional supports from others prolong our life.

From our experiences of life, we can safely conclude that love can do magic. It is now agreed by all that love begets love. We want to be loved and respected but very often we fail to love or show respect for others. Nobody should be deprived of what he/she deserves. The hypocrisy, sycophancy and false promises should be stopped. Everybody has a right to love, justice and peace. If we want to see it established, we must learn to respect the same right of others. And we can be sure that hatred and jealousy will be replaced by peace and justice.

Love whether it's between a man and a woman or for humanity or animals or nature has no meaning until put into action. True love should not urge one to throw acid on the beloved for a refusal. Selfless services and sacrifices are the manifestations of true love. Inspired by the teaching of Christ, a band of selfless people throughout the ages since the time of Christ all over the world devoted their lifetime for the oppressed and destitute. Mother Teresa is one of the valiant messengers of love, rendering rare services to the most neglected ones. Of course, there are many like her, probably unsung but this world needs many more of them.

It is love for others which establishes hope, faith, justice and peace. And it is love which can transform this problem-stricken world into a happy hearth for mankind. We need to uphold love, hope and faith for our own sake. Let this be the lesson for us on this Christmas Day.

about how people should live in order to attain deep happiness in this life.

Jesus, whose earthly beginning we celebrate on Christmas Day, became a brilliant teacher. However, two of the most revolutionary lessons he taught were more clearly understood by observing his compassionate behavior than by hearing him speak. That is, self sacrifice for the benefit of persons unrelated to him by family ties, and, forgiveness of persons who did wrong to him: Jesus' life powerfully illustrated these magnanimous virtues. Wherever factionalism exists, Jesus' self sacrificing love and forgiveness continue to be immensely relevant and instructive.

The joy of Christmas is not Continued on page 11

Christians in Bangladesh

by Joseph D' Silva

BANGLADESHI Christians are mostly recognizable by their names, though in some cases it may not be so. About 92% live in pockets of villages almost in every district, most often than not around a church or a school.

Christians farm small tracts of land. In the towns they work in offices. A few run small businesses; others are teachers or nurses. There are a few physicians, lawyers, civil servants and military men. There is one MP from the Garo tribal area in the north.

Economically they are middle class or poor. The literacy rate among them is 64%. In spite of this it cannot be said that Christians have made much contribution to the arts and sciences in the country or have risen to places of eminence. The reasons for this are many. In the days of the British, Christians were content to make do with their small land holdings and survive. They were cosy in their faith. They had the privilege of attending schools but thereafter had no ambition. With the birth of Pakistan in 1947 came the realization of being a minority and having to do better to survive.

Bangladeshi, first and Christian afterward, they are best known perhaps for their honesty. They number around three lakhs, own about 89,649 dwelling units and have 463 churches.

Initially, Christian missionaries came with Portuguese settlers and traders. The surnames of Christians in Chittagong, Noakhali, Barisal and Dhaka are a pointer to this. After converting local people, these missionaries gave them their own names to distinguish Christians from non-Christians.

Christians in Bangladesh belong mainly to three denominations: Catholics, Baptists and Anglicans. The Catholics comprise the largest denomination with about 100,000 members and for the purposes of religious administration come under one Archbishop.

After the war of liberation, Christians made some progress but not enough. A good number of them received post-secondary education. Many turned to small, service-oriented businesses. Still others went to the Middle East, some farther overseas to the USA, Canada, Australia, and

Europe. Bangladeshi Christians have made significant contribution in three areas: education, health and rehabilitation. The contribution to education is seen in the primary and secondary schools. Though not many in number, these schools are to be found mainly in the villages. Most children attending the schools are non-Christian boys and girls. Known for the discipline and extra-curricular activities like sports, debates, and reading of books, the schools are patron-

have been involved in the relief and rehabilitation of calamity-affected people. The programmes range from distributing food and relief materials to building houses and cyclone shelters, running trade schools and organizing the poor to develop agriculture. The budget of one organisation engaged in over 30 projects is running over 40 crore Taka.

During disasters, emergency aid is given to the affected as quickly as possible. When the latest cyclone warning came in November 1992,

Young men took up arms and fought in various sectors along with the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist freedom fighters. Several died.

Even though Bangladesh Christians are born and brought up here, they are thought to have an imported religion, a western one. Nothing could be far from the truth as Christianity arose in Palestine in the Middle East. Their allegiance is to their country and to their faith.

During the Gulf war, Bangladesh Christians were made to feel very insecure. Few in this country could realize that Christians with Arabic names fought in the Iraqi army, or for that matter, Christian Palestinians are engaged in the fight for the Palestinian homeland. Jesus Christ was a Palestinian, crucified by the Jews.

In spite of the Christians belonging to Bangladesh, they are made to feel uneasy. Their activities in social work, though respected and admired, are looked upon as a means to conversion. Christians, wherever they are, have always had a tradition of opening a school first and a dispensary afterward pointing to Jesus Christ's teaching and healing powers. By these acts Bangladeshi Christians identify themselves with Christians world-wide. It is a testimony to their faith.

As this millennium draws to a close and one looks forward with excitement to the new one, Bangladeshi Christians ponder about their community. Though there has been an increase in numbers and some progress has been made, there has also been a shift from traditional values. Youth question elders. Unemployment and poverty have led to despair. There is lack of discipline and dedication in the education system. Teachers, once widely respected, have lost their esteem. Irresponsible men threaten lives and property. Charitable works are looked upon with suspicion. They wonder what shape the community will take and how they will better contribute to the nation. One hope is for a free exchange of ideas on faith between them and their brethren at large with the view that this nation can contribute internationally to the growth of knowledge.



emergency aid workers were ready to move to Cox's Bazar from Chittagong and Dhaka as soon as they were required. In many parts of Bangladesh, Christians perform works of charity. There are 3 hospitals, 2 leprosaria, 44 dispensaries, 8 orphanages, 2 homes for dying destitutes and 1 for handicapped. These are adequately staffed and efficiently run for the welfare of people from all faiths. Bangladeshi Christians made heroic contributions during the war of liberation.



Santa Claus: The Dutch Way



Gift shop being prepared at a local hotel



Foreigners residing in Dhaka in celebration Photo: Mohsin



Gift shop being prepared at a local hotel Photo: Mohsin

Ho, Ho, Ho! Merry Christmas!

by Sanjida Shaheed

IT'S here again! Christmas is here with all its glories, mistletoe, holly, gifts, card, Christmas tree, Santa Claus and a lot, lot... lot more. So Merry Christmas to you all! Hope you'll all have heaps of fun with the Christmas stuffs. Now let me offer you some fun about really knowing Christmas!

You're gonna have a decorated fir tree as a Christmas tree at your home. Actually this custom began in Germany with the medieval mystery plays. A tree played very important part in these, and when the plays began in church, the tree was surrounded with lighted candles.

Gradually the tree entered people's homes and the first one in Britain was brought at the beginning of the 19th century.

Christmas is not properly 'Christmassy' without Santa Claus. Actually, Father Christmas is a blend of many traditions. Scandinavia gave him his reindeer and sleigh. St. Nicholas, a bishop, who gave presents to children, gave him his alternative name, Santa Claus. This is a variant of the Dutch Sinter Klass, a popular name for St. Nicholas. The

idea of Santa Claus was taken to America by Dutch settlers, and from there, it found its way to Britain.

Christmas spirits really rise skyhigh when the carols are sung. It is Italy, where the carols are said to be born. St. Francis of Assisi and his fellow monks composed bright songs based upon the nativity story, and these were passed round by word of mouth. This was in the 13th century. From Italy, carols spread to Spain, France and Germany. The earliest English carol goes back to 1410, but they were probably being circulated long before this. Taught by mothers to children, the involved a dis-

tingtive, gay rhythm and a simple story. However, the carols that are sung today mostly date not from the 13th, but from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

Christmas cakes are shaped like yule logs, or decorated with them. It actually reminds us of an old custom dating from medieval times. An



enormous limb of wood was carried to the fireplace in the baronial hall; and smaller homes had their festive fires, too. The yule log was always kindled with a charred remnant saved from the previous year. It has its origin in pagan days in the distant past when, after the shortest day of winter, bonfires were lit throughout the land. This was a ceremony to welcome back the sun

A Christmas Reflection

by Robert Mc Cahill

Christians perceive that the nobility of Jesus' entire magnificent life was overshadowed by his lowly birth. We have reflected on it and are constantly impressed by him because, although he was infinitely blessed and beloved by God, Jesus did not rest complacent in God's favor. Rather, he emptied himself and existed as a servant. Jesus refused to demand for himself the trappings of a successful worldly life and was, instead, a person intent upon sharing with others him knowledge

tuted ninety per cent of his total life span we are informed simply that he grew in wisdom, age and grace. Following that period, during three brief, bright years, he went about doing good to people and also healing the sick. The love of God which filled his heart impelled him to sympathize with all people, regardless of their religious beliefs or doubts. Jesus' compassion, when met by the trust which desperately sick persons placed in him, resulted in many miraculous cures.

Thus, Jesus — whose name means savior in the Hebrew language — was born in a poor family. In worldly terms he was an ordinary person belonging to an oppressed people in an obscure part of the world. His humble birth in Bethlehem was followed by thirty years of which we know so little that they are called "the hidden years" of his life. From this period which consti-

It's really more fun to use the Christmas things if you know about the origins, beliefs and charms. Once again I wish you a happy, merry, real 'Christmassy Christmas'!