Dhaka, Wednesday, April 14, 1993

On to a Prosperous New Year, Hopefully

Bengali people all over the world, especially those of us in Bangladesh, will celebrate today the beginning of the Bangla New Year, the last, in this century. Standing at the very end of what undoubtedly has been the most eventful, the most creative and the most rich century, we take great pride and satisfaction at the fact that the Bangla New Year is gradually finding its rightful place in the national life.

It was the great Mughal Akbar, the pioneer of new thinking in so many areas, who in 1556 A.D. introduced the Bangla calendar. Taking the lunar based Hijri calendar, he transformed it into a solar based Bengali one. Thus with one brilliant and visionary stroke, he blended thousands of years of tradition based calendar in local use, with the Hijri one which was introduced by the Muslims. This new calendar not only gave the Bengali people a source of pride, but also represented a perfect blend of the Islamic tradition with that of the local. While the 'year' was taken straight from the Hiri era, yet the name of the months, the division of the seasons, etc. reflected the culture, tradition, and the natural conditions dictated by climate and geography of the land. Thus was born the Bangla era whose new year we so lovingly celebrate today.

With the coming of the British, the Christian calendar gradually captured the centre stage, which continued during the Pakistan period. Starting with our language movement in 1952, and subsequently through our nationalist struggle of the 50's and 60's the Bangla calendar began to make a come back, taking its rightful place, as can be expected, only after the birth of Bangladesh.

While the utility and international appeal of the Christian calendar will be there, yet it can never replace the impact of the Bangla calendar in the heart and minds of our people. Talk to any vil-. lager anywhere and he or she will tell when he plans to plant his crop, his harvest time, the time to fix a date for his son's or daughter's marriage, when to plan a new venture or take a trip — all of it will be according to the native calendar. The Bangla calendar blends with the rains, the floods, the coming of the flowers and the fruits — not to mention its association with myths, fairytales and nursery rhymes.

Nobody should see any contradiction in our wanting to use more and more the Bangla calendar and our desire to become a part of the international world. The closest example to learn from would be Thailand which, while modernising at a break-neck pace, uses the Buddhist calendar for everything. Ultimately it is a question of cultural identity and the firmness of our decision to be ourselves, while we become linked with the international community. While becoming a part of "one world", each of us must carry with him/her the magnificent cultural diversity that we represent.

The century, the last year of which begins today, saw the Bengali people acquiring the intellectual maturity to think for themselves, breaking the shackles of colonialism, and later revolting against a tyrannical army occupation to establish their own independent country - for the very first time However, our record of making the best use of that freedom and independence is far from glorious.

On the occasion of welcoming the new year the year that stands as a bridge between the passing away of a century and the coming of a new one — we wish our people peace, tranquility and growth. We wish that our leadership could learn to see beyond the petty party interest and put the nation above everything else. We wish that the urgent and massive national problems occupy the centre-stage in the minds of our political leaders.

Finally, we wish our patrons, readers and the people of Bangladesh a very happy and prosperous New Year.

Woes of Foreign Students

There appears to be a serious breakdown in communication between a group of foreign students in Bangladesh and their academic institutions. This specifically relates to the medium of instruction used in the teaching in, to take a particular case, a medical college in Dhaka.

According to a letter from a foreign student published in this paper yesterday, the increased use of Bangla has put him (or her) and perhaps other non-Bangladeshis at a serious disadvantage. Significantly enough, this was not the case when the same student was in the first year when about 90 per cent of the teaching was in English" and he had obtained a good result in that year's examination. Then, as the student puts it, "now, in the fourth year, the teaching medium is almost 95 per cent in Bangla" with the result "I am always at least one or two steps behind local students." The tone of the letter is, indeed, one of frustration. There are also no reasons to doubt the validity of the problems the student is faced

Without obtaining the version of the unidentified institution where the foreigner is currently studying, it is hard to say what has brought about what may well be more than a breakdown of communication. Was the switch to the increased use of Bangla, in place of English, during the third or the fourth academic year quite arbitrary, without providing students prior information on the change? Or, as the student suggests, was the Government of Bangladesh responsible for withholding full information about the medium of instruction to prospective students from such countries as Malaysia, Nepal, Myanmar and Indonesia?

One sad fact, out of many, is that quite a few of these students spend their own funds to study here, instead of being supported by scholarships from either their own countries or Bangladesh. In fact, there is quite a competition among foreign students to get admission in the medical colleges in Bangladesh, where the standard was once said to be high enough to earn recognition from several Asian and African countries. The campus violence now poses a threat to these institutions. One should not be surprised if the number of foreign students seeking entry into our institutions already shows a decline.

On a day like this — the auspicious start of a Bangla New Year - our pledge is to give our national language its rightful and unchallenged place in our everyday life. We can do so without undermining English, the country's vital link with the outside world. Here, we must also show the consideration to foreign students who should not fall victims to any breakdown in communication, metaphorically and otherwise.

leading lakistani daily has said what the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) would have done if it did not have Pakisten to blame for There is a India's troubles point in the criticism because the BJP leader, L K Advant, singled out Pakistan for the Bombay bomb blasts within minutes of explosions.

Evidence, if any came later. The BJP's tactics are understandable. After failing in of vilification its campaign against the Indian Muslims, the party had to pick up an issue that would have overtones of the Muslim problem. Pakistan is seen a product of Hindu-Muslim tension.

But the issue assumes serious proportions when the Government of India lends its voice to the charge. Foreign Minister Dinesh Singh has said at the South Asian Foreign Correspondent Club that Pakistan should either turn in the Memons, eportedly responsible for the Bombay blasts, or face the prospect of being exposed as a terrorist state. Maharashira chief minister Sharad Pawer has left no doubt about Pakistan's com-

Sixteen people are said to have confessed that they were trained in Pakistan; they have supposedly mentioned the name of training places. They have also allegedly said that the task entrusted to them was to arrange a series of bomb blasts throughout India. The intelligence agencies have chipped in the information that the quantity of explosives seized so far is only one tenth of what has been smuggled into the country

These are disturbing revelations, if true. Since they come in the wake of Indiawide belief that Pakistan is

I HAVE found S M Ali's arti-

cle on "Non-partisan Experts

Left Out in the Gold" (The Daily

Star, 8.4.93) very interesting.

Clearly Mr Ali has used the

term 'non-partisan' in a party

political context and I shall use

it the same way in this write-

up. In the broader social con-

text, all are partisans given

that they hold tertain values

and perspectives. It clearly

emerges that SM Ali thinks

and, I agree with him entirely,

that intellectual in their pro-

fessional capacities have an

important role to play in na-

tion-building attivities. The

question of their interaction

with politicians, particularly

those in power, on that basis

would arise only if the politi-

cians recognized this highly

potential source of knowledge,

analyses, ideas and views.

which they could profitably use

toward formulating appropri-

ate policies in various fields.

The fact of the matter is that

somehow, the politicians and

even technocrats in power

often consider themselves to

be repositories of all wisdom

and need not, therefore, con-

tendency in this country that

advisors, both political and bu-

reaucratic, eulogize the top

leaders as the bossessors of

unparalleled vision and sagac-

ity and create conditions that

they become increasingly

alienated from the realities on

the ground; and, needless to

say, the process makes sure

that they do not feel the need

for interaction with non-parti-

fact a manifestation of a deep

rooted malaise in the society.

which may be termed as

vested-interest based divisive-

ness, that militares against any

consensus building process as

individuals and groups ruth-

This lack of interaction is in

san intellectuals.

There has a ways been a

sult experts or intellectuals.

Gujarat, Bombay, Bhopal etc. The Memons and their accomplices - Pakistan has been given a list of 13 - may well be in that country. However, the question to be asked is whether the government theory of Pakistani hand is as clearly established as is being projected. Their escape to Pakistan does not ipso facto mean it is responsible for the action. Suspicions, however serious, should be proved before Dinesh Singh, Pawar and such other government leaders

The Indian foreign office has itself goofed off on tracking the culprits. The Bombay blasts took place on March 12. The passports of Memons and others are cancelled on March 22 and the Pakistan High Commissioner is summoned on the March 23 afternoon to locate them. What he is given is the photostat copies of pictures of the six culprits and the antecedents of their passports. There were no other

Leave Advani's allegation

The Bitterness of Indo-Pak Relations

The disturbing part is the campaign India is articulating towards naming Pakistan as a terrorist state. Why are we trying to queer the pitch? The point at issue is not India versus Pakistan but India versus the Memons. Let it stay at that.

helping militants in Punjab and Kashmir, the allegations have gained credibility. No doubt is being raised. The impression is that loads of weapons are coming from the other side, although Rajesh Pilot, Minister of State for Home Affairs, said in the Rajya Sabha the other day that the government had no reports about the accumulation of smuggled modern arms and their use in Delhi,

make the charge.

aside, New Delhi and the cen

tral ministers said within three days of the blasts that the needle of suspicion was directed towards Pakistan. The Congress party's spokesman, V N Gadgil, was more categorical when he said on March 16 that "the involvement of the ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) Pakistan is most obvious."

If it was so definite, why did New Delhi take 11 days in getting in touch with Pakistan? The foreign office could have

of Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Shartf, when informed was cffusive.

True, Islamabad's track record has been far from satis factory. The persons who hi jacked an Indian Airlines plane were sentenced to death by a Pakistan special court nearly three years ago but there has been no follow up. Did the hi jackers appeal against the sentence? Some information on the subject would have qui

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

BETWEEN THE LINES

at least conveyed its initial reaction. It could have said that the Memons were the culprits and that they might try to enter into Pakistan. Even Dubai has a grievance that it was rung up on March 20, eight days after the blasts. The Memons flew from there on

March 17. Dinesh Singh's charge that the Memons flew from Dubai to Karachi by Pakistan International Airlines flight PK-214 on March 17 may well be correct. But those who indulge in blasts or sabotage do not travel on genuine passports and seldom have a visa in their own names. A precautionary word to Pakistan on the 13th would have gone a long way because the response

ctened India's reservations. The impression about the Memons is that they will not be pursued properly, even if apprehended.

In the absence of extradition treaty between India and Pakistan, the Memons may not be handed over to Delhi. This fear has already been voiced by the BJP. Unfortunately, the ruling party is contributing its bit. The disturbing part is the campaign India is articulating towards naming Pakistan as a terrorist state. Why are we trying to queer the pitch? The point at issue is not India versus Pakistan but India versus the Memons. Let it stay at that.

Even if New Delhi is able to persuade Washington to de clare Pakistan a terrorist state

how does it help us in our prime objective of improving relations with the people across the border? Pakistan will feel more cut up and may go away farther from India. The age-old hostilities will get a fresh edge. And such visits as that of Benazir Bhutto to Delhi under the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation aegis will be of little consequence.

True, our perceptions are different: we believe Pakistan is out to destabilise India and they feel that India has not vet reconciled to the formation of Pakistan. But both geography and history have thrown us together. We cannot run away from them. New Delhi has to learn how to adjust and live with Pakistan, however intransigent. On the other hand, Islamabad has to give up the thinking that the more rigid the line it takes against the country across the border, the higher it goes in public es-

The subcontinent can find its destiny according to its own genius if left alone and the peoples are allowed to look within, not without. The US wants to be a broker in the region and try to disseminate the impression that the two coun tries would have jumped at each other's throat but for Washington.

Take the recent book by an American author, who says that India and Pakistan were on the brink of nuclear war in 1990 and that Washington averted it

This is not true. I was then India's High Commissioner in London. I can say without any hesitation that the statement is wrong. What happened was that Sahebzada Yaqub Khan, then Pakistan's foreign minister, spewed fire and brimstone at his first meeting with Inder Guiral, India's foreign minister, and warned India that Pakistan would not sit as a spectator if 'the suppression' of Kashmiris did not stop.

in reply. Guiral said that the trouble in Kashmir was of 'akistan's making and that India would defend its territory with all the forces it had at its command. The two sides even advanced their troops to the border. But subsequently they settled to their usual uneasy relationship. Robert Gates, the US special envoy, visited Islamabad and New Delhi only when tension was subsiding.

We must sort our problems across the table, without involving directly or indirectly any other country, much less the US. Washington worked with Islamabad against our interests for 45 years. Now that the cold war has ended, it finds New Delhi more useful than Islamabad. America has its own interest in the region. Why should India or Pakistan allow itself to be a pawn in their game?

The history of India and Pakistan relations is littered with hostilities. They have fought three wars and they continue to nourish the hurts. With time they may forget their quarrels. As Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder. said: "Some nations have killed millions of each other's and yet an enemy of today is a friend of tomorrow. That is history."

OPINION

'Non-partisan Experts Left Out in the Cold'

lessly pursue self interests at the expense of others if necessary, and often to the exclusion of national interests.

Notwithstanding differences among political parties from ideological and policy planning points of view, it is of crucial importance that there is a broad consensus in terms of goals and basic stands on major issues such as the establishment of rule of law, democratization of the society, poverty alleviation, the on-going privatisation and globalization of the economy, socioeconomic differentiation, education for all, self-reliance vs dependence on foreign aid, agrarian reform, and employment generation. Only then can there be concerted efforts toward building the national by all concerned within the framework of the established consensus but from their respective positions and perspectives.

In this context, it is extremely important that the government and opposition political parties are well informed about the realities, options and costs, without which neither consensus nor concerted efforts can be generated. Hence, the politicians in power and those in opposition must cast their net wide and interact with intellectuals in various fields and of different persuasions, particularly nonpartisan ones because they are likely to be pragmatic and can

offer independent advice. The reality in this country, however, has been one of demagogy rather than pragmatism. The power that be rules; and Some Comments

Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad

the rest sidelined. Even newspaper reports of meetings and seminars reflect this power configuration. If a minister spoke, his/her statement is usually elaborately reported even if rothing new or of substance has been spoken. At the same time, an intellectual may have spoken very useful words and made important suggestions, but those are often ignored. Indeed, journalists as a professional group has a tremendous role to play not only through interaction with politicians but also through interaction with other professional groups and by disseminating constructive ideas offered by them. Unfortunately, in this coun-

try a culture of giving importance to expatriate 'experts' over national experts has developed. Even a low level offictal of a donor or UN agency has easy access to righer echelons of bureaucracy and government, while non-partisan national experts of high calibre are often ignored. This culture at once shows the bankruptcy of the leadership and erodes national self-respect. There is no use decrying the fact that donors wield tremendous influence over socio-economic policy-making and even political process in this country. They do and would, given the fact that we have developed a psychological fixation that we can not survive without foreign

aid and foreign advice. In order to maintain our sovereignty in decision-making and to uphold national self-respect we must get out of this fixation and use our own resources optimally and prepare our own policies, plans and programmes having regard to our socio-economic and cultural realities. Foreign aid may then be sought and accepted within such a framework. In this process, the first thing that will need to be done is to create conditions for national experts and professionals in various fields, partisans and non-partisans, to make contributions as best as they are ca-

In many other countries including nieghbouring India, intellectual activities are supported and promoted by the government. For example, there are many research institutions in India which are reg istered as private non-profit organizations under the Societies Act of 1860. These are recognized as academic institutions and provided financial support through Indian Social Science Research Council, regardless of the political persuasions of the scholars concerned. Hence, in all relevant fields, data, analyses, ideas, views, and discoveries of high quality are available for the government to use. In Bangladesh, organization of research activities outside the

government in this fashion is not encouraged, in fact obstructed. There are also problems

with the experts and intellectuals themselves. Many feel insecure and can not continue to works as non-partisans. They, therefore, seek to align themselves with the government or the opposition. Those who do align themselves with the government and play their cards right are often rewarded with important official positions, at times well above what their ability would justify. On the other hand, those who align themselves with an opposition party, mainstreaming often tends to elude them as the turf is held by the politicians who consider themselves to be the masters. If non-partisan intellectuals and professionals could organize themselves cffectively to make their voices loud and clear, that would have certainly forced the political process to recognize their importance. But that is perhaps asking for too much, given that the community of intellectuals is also not free from the pursuit of narrow self-interests by individuals and groups, just as it is the case in other seg-

ments of the society. In this context, I should mention that I also see a problem in the case of a politician, disenchanted with his/her own party for one reason or another, leading an intellectual movement even if he/she is a recognized expert/intellectual. Non-partisans can genuinely be suspicious of the motives of such a person. It may very well be that the process could be

used to promote the political interest of the leader. The crisis in the Democratic Forum, as has been pointed out by Mr Ali, may be construed as a reflection of such misgivings or developments.

S M Ali has characterized the non-partisan capable experts left out in the cold as being the worst victims. I would not consider them victims because a failure on the part of the politicians, in government or in opposition, to interact with them does not amount to a right denied or an injustice perpetrated as they are nonpartisans, although they may genuinely be piqued by the exclusion. The government which would have benefitted by interacting with them is certainly a loser; and I think the ultimate losers are the people of the country who could have benefitted from broader-based policy decision.

Genuine intellectuals can

brush aside such sidelining and carry on with their activitics generating data, analyses, ideas, policy prescriptions, and discoveries and disseminating them as much as possible. However, given that tentacles of the government bureaucracy are a pervasive phenomenon in this country, the government can obstruct such intellectual pursuits. As a matter of fact, it should be in the interest of the government not to do so, but actually to interact with such intellectuals. Moreover, the government should support and facilitate intellectual activities of not only partisans in its favour but also non-partisans and even those who have different political perspectives in order to enrich the intellectual environment in the country for the benefit of the nation as a

ublication 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.

Let's be true Muslims

Sir, It seems Muslims today, all over the world are a most harassed and oppressed group of human race. It has often caused me immense agonies and left me probing with a series of unanswered conflicting question

Being a Muslim (do I dare say with humilay and suspicion), I often feel angry as to why God's 'chosen followers' are in a state in which they are now. Surely the time has come for us for an intensive soul searching and self-critical analysis.

The Muslim Ummah is too vast. Yet as a Ingali Muslim (one who has lived over 10 years in the then West Pakistan with a brother still living in Pakistan as a Senior Pakistani bureaucrat), I wish to make a few bbservations. Strange and unacceptable as it may seem to many, I look for no rewards of retribution, since the views are my very own. Yet I shall consider my efforts worthwhile if I am able to even as much arouse the curiosity of a few.

Bangladesh and Pakistan of today were a single nation only twenty two years ago. The sub-

continent now consisting of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh perhaps contain the largest section of the Muslim population of the world. To me it appears that more than our lack of interest and faith in Islam, the undue 'indulgence' and 'the 'blind faith' are the root causes of the problems rather than the absence thereof.

Beginning mid December last year, I spent as many as three weeks visiting my inlaws at Karachi. Amongst other things, the purpose was to mainly condole the family on the death of my mother-in-law and at the same time attend the marriage ceremony of one of my wife's nieces. I am afraid the life and living of what I saw in this largest Metropolitan city of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan was hardly representative of what Islam stands for in its broader (universal) perspective or otherwise. It was nothing but ceremonies galore. While preparation for the 40th day programmes for the departed soul was afoot following the passing away of the individual, hectic preparation for the 'Mehendi' ceremony scheduled for two-days there-

world. Yet some of its traditions have surpassed those of the Hindu society itself. The indulgence in food and frolicking is shocking. In this middle class fame marriage, I have witnessed it being solemnized with hard carned money provided by relations from abroad; parents marrying off their daughters incurring debts, completely out of proportion to their incomes. What an irony, our scholars and social reformers keep condemning the Hindu society for all its strange and oppressive measures in marriage of its womenfolk yet they turn a blind eye to their own.

Does not Islam somewhere talk of simple living, helping the poor and the down-trodden? Yet most of us eat more than we need, procure more clothes than we actually need or use, acquire material possessions beyond proportions and to top it all many of us arrogantly display and boast of these possessions. We are intolerant, and full of spite and scorn. We say one thing and do the other. We even boast of ignorance and are content with little learning. We blame others for our failures. We revel and laugh at the fatlures of

It is thus passed time that we urgently return to the real world and embark on a soulsearching. While we are, and we need to be, concerned after was on. Pakistan boasts of about what is happening in being more Islamic than many Bosnia-Herzegovina in Yugoother Islamic states of the slavia, the persecution of

others. Islam forbids these and

more.

Muslims in India, the political and religious murders and harassments of our brethren by the Israelis in Palestine, let us for once turn to our own homes and once again put our body and mind on becoming Muslims and the best of the human race.

Shamsher A Chowdhury Dhanmondi, Dhaka

WASA self-billing system

Sir, I fully agree with Mr M

Shaikh who wrote in your columns on 1-4-93. Under self-billing system, we expect to pay the bills nearly one and a half months ahead of computerised bill. I received a computerised bill (for the period 29-9-92 to 8-3-93) on 29-3-93, with one month's grace period to pay. In the mean time, I had already paid two bills and was stuck up with the third on 1-4-93, when the bank informed me that they were not to accept the bill under self-billing system.

I have another water line with separate account number under which also I paid two installments and prepared the 3rd to pay on 1-4-93. Under this account I have not received any bill from computerised section.

This change of system should have been announced in the paper to avoid unnecessary trouble by the customers. The representative of WASA who took meter reading on 8-3-93 did neither inform me about

the change of system, nor enquired if I paid any bill after

Under computerised bill system it will be another problem if the bill is not received due to postal fault. We will have to run for a duplicate bill. How long should we wait for the bill? To my mind the self-billing should be continued for those who have proved to be regularly paying customers.

M S Hag Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Remittances from USA

Sir, In a series of queries by Bangladeshi residents in New York and their dependents in Bangladesh about the status of the operation of Money Remittance Corporation in New York, it was found that despite serious efforts made by the president of Remittance Corporation at New York and the local bank in Dhaka, they could not start operation because of gridlock created by Bangladesh Bank. As a result, in most cases, unauthorised channels are being used by Bangladeshis in USA to send their hard earned money to their dependents in Bangladesh depriving the country of the foreign exchange

Keeping that in view, with a bold approach, the New York based Remittance Corporation with the permission of the Government there has been trying for the last few months to conclude a Money Transfer

Agreement with a bank in Dhaka to facilitate speedy transfer of money to Bangladesh and help eliminate the unauthorised channels. This Corporation has been conducting remittance business from the USA to more than twenty countries of the world for a long time. But despite submission of all the necessary documents through a local bank in Dhaka, the Bangladesh Bank is yet to take a decision and files are reportedly being reshuffled at various desks at the top level. After months of silence, on March 28, Bangladesh Bank sent a letter to New York State Bank seeking information about the Corporation's performance and financial status. It is to be noted that the Corporation's financial status as well as performance reports, obtained by the local bank at Dhaka from prime banks of New York, were submitted to Bangladesh Bank long before. It would appear from the above that the Bangladesh

Bank is completely confused at the decision making level, detached from western banking practise. It also appears funny that the Bangladesh Bank has recently asked the local Bank for cash deposit of US \$1,00,000/- by the above Remittance Corporation for allowing the latter to effect remittances to Bangladesh by the Bangladeshi nationals staying in USA when Bangladesh Bank does not run any risk for allowing the corporation to conduct such remittance business.

ATM Elias

New York