

## A National Festival

Wednesday's Dhaka convincingly proved the first truly secular festival has arrived — in all the fulfilling connotations of that verb. And the objectives towards which the Pahela Baishakh or the Bengali New Year's Day festival was launched by Chhayanaut way back in 1966 stands fully realised. The nation has in this now a fully fledged true — perhaps the biggest — national festival, participated by all communities and religious denominations and people of all economic classes. The nation has very colourfully fashioned something that is far from official and formal and comes straight from the heart. It was Tagore who first underlined the sentiment that has been basic to the success of this day as a concourse of the whole nation — *Bangaleer ghoray jawto bhat-bone aek hoker aek hoke*, he sang and supplemented it with another song where he wondered: *Bhat ch-hede bhat kaw din thakey*.

The controversy over whether this Pahela Baishakh set off the new fifteenth century of the Bengali era was not cleared till the day was here. Many who believed we were in a new century from the daybreak on Wednesday took special interest in celebrating the hundred-year occasion to the best of their taste and ability. Those who differed and would wait for the next new year's day, didn't however tuck themselves away from the gaiety and rather joined it with added fervour. A flash of Bengalee genius settled the issue when all parties came to hail the day as the first day of year 1400 without going into the question of whether this figure was the starting year of a century. The nation was bent on celebrating the day to the best of its capacity and controversies had to make way.

What did the people celebrate in Dhaka and Chittagong and Rajshahi and everywhere else? What was behind making the day so special? They celebrated, in keeping with the history of the institution of the festival and the ideal behind it, the Bengali-ness of their own identity. If this state and the society it houses have to live and prosper, they must first of all be imbued with the sense of belonging — belonging to some identity that would move their spirits to endeavour for certain common goals. Pahela Baishakh this year came tellingly to offset the divisive games that have largely overtaken the nation.

The best thing about the Pahela Baishakh celebrations is its power to stay above partisan politics. The festival was once one of the best political weapons against Pakistan and continues till today to be the best political bet against bigotry and obscurantism, narrow fascistic communal developments by keeping miles away from power politics. The mentors of BNP, whatever their initial feelings, also joined the resurgence of Bengali nationalist spirit. The opposition forces have also by this time arranged themselves strongly on the side of the celebrations, which is a most welcome development. But the non-partisan character of the festival continues uncompromised.

One never knew Dhaka could be so colourful. And that it has such a vigorous population. And that here lived so many children and young women. The same should be true for all urban centres of Bangladesh. Here is a day that brings out all people, out into giving their best to their social milieu and into sharing in the best gifts of others. The Baishakhi so wonderfully cuts across the impenetrable gender gap of our society.

And Baishakhi is a major festival of the peoples of half of Asia. Here is some affinity that would heal the nationalist narrowness of the day, if there be any.

## Remodelling Housing Policy

A new housing policy, the formulation of which is now underway according to Works Minister Barrister Rafiqul Islam Mia, is undoubtedly long overdue. Whether the one now being worked out will be equal to the gigantic task of providing the country's people with a decent shelter for living is the million-dollar question. The minister however was found to be generous in his expression of concern for the poor. If poverty is the issue, then a housing policy capable of addressing the problem of the shelterless people will require a vision beyond any straight-cut formula.

People have long become accustomed to hearing of the unlimited virtues of proposed plans and policies only to see how the promises made are allowed to die down without even making a ripple in the lives of the common mass. It is difficult to have a precise figure of the total homeless people in the country. The minister however has given the percentage of slum dwellers in Dhaka city to be exactly 35. The other three metropolitan cities are not expected to fare any better on this count. If the country's 25 per cent people live in urban centres, the share of slum people is certainly going to be substantial in the urban way of life.

This points to the fact that the government will have to spend a huge sum on improving the living condition of these neglected millions. But living condition does not necessarily mean the dwelling places alone. There is a need to complement the housing environment with education, income and other facilities required for a decent living. This involves not just the Works Ministry but also the entire government in the whole exercise for relocation of priorities and remodelling of a host of policies. Housing, after all, is one area that falls under the ambience of basic human rights.

If considered from this point of view, a government finds its job still more daunting; because to ensure the basic human rights for all people of the country, it must as well be prepared to counter the lacerating process of increasing landlessness in villages. Shortage of basic infrastructure in villages are as much responsible for the majority of the population living in dilapidated hutments. Even a programme seeking to provide the poor with low-cost houses will be unthinkable under the prevailing circumstances. Internal mobilisation of resources is a far cry now. The government's plan to adopt a national building code may certainly yield some benefits in the area of unplanned construction. As for the floating of a housing bank and the provision of hire-purchase of government building, there is hardly any possibility of the programme making any contribution to easing the housing problem of the poor.

**E**IGHT hundred kilometers to the south from Beijing, across the yellow river in the central province of Henan, is the village of Tanchunwan. In the centre of this typical central plains village stands a large two-story L-shaped brick building with a facade of light green and pink tiles, which is the village primary school. The tile facade and the neatly kept compound surrounded by a brick wall bear obvious signs of care and pride on the part of the village people.

All 210 children of primary and pre-school age in Tanchunwan attend the eight classes in the school ranging from kindergarten to grade six. The headmaster reported that almost all children completed the full primary cycle and went on to enrol in the junior middle school in nearby centre of Niudian township. In 1989, the village had been declared by the provincial authorities as free of illiteracy; the same was true of most other central Henan villages. The adult education courses run by the education department of Niudian township and Mixian (pronounced Meshean) county to which Tanchunwan village belongs, are now on practical farming, manufacturing and trading skills rather than on literacy.

The 500,000 yuan (about 100,000 US dollars) needed for constructing the new school building, completed two years ago, came from the village itself — from the contribution of a successful entrepreneur from the village, to be precise. Zhou Shuanzhi, the lease-holder of the village coal-pit (which was formerly owned by the commune, but now under the liberal economic order, contracted out to Mr Zhou), ran his business so profitably that he was able and willing to make the contribution to pay for the school building. The salary of 12 teaching personnel and other operating costs are financed from a combination of sources — 60 per cent from the county's share of tax revenues provided by the provincial government and the rest raised at the county and the township level.

A metal band of considerable size energetically played by rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed children in red-and-white uniforms greets distinguished visitors to Tanchunwan school such as a recent group of education officials from other developing countries who came to China to attend a national conference on education called by Premier Li Peng. The school library, the stock of essential learning aids, the supply of piano organs and other musical instruments and sports equipment appropriate for young children all testified to a comprehensive and well-run programme of basic education for children.

**Pragmatic Approaches**  
The primary school of Tanchunwan is by no means an exception. The Peoples'

# China's Investment in Basic Education Creates Learning Opportunities for All

by Manzoor Ahmed

Republic, since its inception in 1949, has made basic education of the masses a cornerstone of its political ideology and national development effort. The power of mobilization and persuasion of the formidable Communist Party of China has been combined with pragmatic and diversified approaches appropriate for different socio-economic circumstances of the vast country to extend education opportunities to all. As a result, by the beginning of the 1980s, primary school enrolment level reached 80 per cent and adult literacy rate was raised from barely 20 per cent at liberation to over 60 per cent.

In the decade of the 1980s, as the intricate structure for political and economic control, mobilization and management of social services at the local level through the communes began to be dismantled, the government and the Party ensured that the basic education programmes, especially primary education, did not suffer. The country and township authorities, which partially replaced the communes, were enjoined to keep the primary schools running and to find necessary resources for them.

One pragmatic approach widely practiced was to have community and parents appointed teachers (minban teachers), who were less qualified and were paid a much smaller salary than that of their official counterparts. The minban teachers formed the majority of the teaching force in Chinese primary schools until the mid-eighties. Although qualified teachers on official salary-scale are now replacing the minban teachers, just as the famous barefoot doctors of earlier years were replaced in the 1980s by more qualified 'village doctors' in the health clinics, the latter still constitute over one-third of the primary school teaching force.

Another approach was to encourage part-time, spare-time and abridged primary education courses for children and young adults, often with simplified curriculum consisting only of Chinese language and arithmetic in less developed parts of the country. The aim was to offer a minimum opportunity to all until a complete and well-developed programme was available.

### Differentiated Targets

New policies and goals adopted in 1985 set differentiated targets for urban and economically developed areas, average rural areas, and the less developed and less accessible parts of the country: for achieving universal 9-year compulsory education. By the year 2000, for 95 per cent of the population, the goal would be achieved; the remaining peo-

ple reaching the target early in the next century. The new policies also formalised and strengthened the *de facto* local responsibility for planning, managing and controlling resources at the county (average of 300,000 people) and the township (10 to 50 thousand people) levels. The national policy guides also required that at all levels of government, the annual allocation and expenditure for education should increase faster than the rate of the growth of the economy at the particular administrative unit.

As China's economy surged forward at a record rate of 9 per cent per annum during the past decade, government's and the Party's urging and the traditional Confucian respect for education prompted the local authorities and communities all over China to invest generously in basic education. There has been a veritable boom in construction of educational facilities throughout the country in the last decade. The most prominent new building in the countryside almost invariably is the primary or general middle school, the adult education centre or a vocational middle school.

Signs of a dynamic economy are evident in Tanchunwan in the new paved road being built replacing the old packed earth and stone track that con-

nects the village with the main road to the provincial capital of Zhengzhou and the neat rows of two-story red-brick buildings which now accommodate all of the 300 village households. Apart from the profitable coal-mine, small manufacturing, processing industries and trading now contribute as much to the villagers' earnings as growing food and cash crops. As Mr Zhou, the benefactor of the primary school, put it, 'spending for education is to ensure that the prosperity of the village will continue to reach higher levels.'

### Relevant Basic Education

Raising the level of basic education of the whole population has been a priority in China since liberation. Initially, the effort in adult and mass education was directed mainly at wiping out the massive illiteracy in the adult population. As the level of literacy increased, the demand for knowledge and skills relevant for improving productivity and quality of life grew. Adult Education Centres, which catered to these learning needs, sprouted all over the country.

In Xin Dian (pronounced Shin-dee-an) township in nearby Xinzheng (Shint-seng) county, the adult education centre serves 53 thousand

residents of the 29 villages within the township boundary. The centre, with a floor-space of 2200 square meter, is located in a 12-acre compound with ample space for several production enterprises, experimental farming plots, classrooms, library and dormitory.

Although an adult education programme existed in the township for a long time, the centre itself was completed in 1989 at a cost of 1.2 million yuan (over 200,000 US dollars) raised by the township authorities. The one dozen full-time teaching staff is complemented by resource persons drawn from other institutions, government departments and private enterprises.

The productive activities of the centre consisted of a chicken farm, a rabbit farm and growing greenhouse vegetables, the profits of which met a part of the running costs of the centre. These activities also provided practical training and demonstration to the trainees of the centre. The courses which ran for a duration of a few days to six months covered everything for which there was a need in the county. Recent courses included various stages of growing different local cash and food crops, forestry, fruits, maintenance of motorized farm equipment, family plan-

ning, marketing, book-keeping, managing small enterprises, orientation of cadres (local officials) and so on. In the last three years, some 6,300 people have received training of various duration in the centre.

The centre also undertakes experiment in improving the breeding of local crops and animals, has arranged for supplies and advice on the use of farm chemicals and seeds and provides consultation to local entrepreneurs on new production technologies. Having made an early contribution in expanding adult literacy, the centre in recent years has significantly contributed to promoting the township's prosperity — and in turn, can count on full support of the people for its own activities.

Education has come to be seen all over China as the foundation of economic prosperity and essential for sustaining the momentum of economic growth in the future. The educational facilities and programmes have become a status symbol and a matter of pride and competition among localities. With almost a quarter of the 1.1 billion Chinese engaged in organized formal and non-formal education activities of some kind, there is in China a veritable feast of learning opportunities in which all can partake.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is Associate Director of Programme Division at UNICEF Headquarters in New York. He served as UNICEF Representative in China from 1986 to 1991.

## Nine Most Populous Developing Countries to Join Education Summit

**O**N 1 March 1993, China's Premier Li Peng opened a national conference on education for all at the Great Hall of the People, which houses the national parliament of the People's Republic. With Vice Governors, heads of Provincial Education Commissions and education specialists from all 30 provinces of China summoned to Beijing for this occasion it was a testimony to China's commitment to educating its people. But the remarkable thing about the meeting was that delegations from other most populous developing countries of the world also were invited for the first time to a Chinese national conference on education. International delegations at Ministerial or high official level joining the conference were from Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Pakistan and Nigeria. Also present were the Director General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor and the Executive Director of UNICEF, James P Grant as special invitees.

The four-day national conference in Beijing was in preparation for another bold venture that will bring the heads of states and govern-

ments of the nine most populous developing countries of the world together in November this year in what has been dubbed as the 'Summit on Education for All'. Premier Li Peng in explaining the purpose of the national meeting, said: 'In order to take stock and formulate plans about universalization of primary education and elimination of illiteracy in China, and coordinate with the Nine Country Summit on Education for All, the Chinese Government has decided to organize the present national conference.'

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao of India has already offered to host the meeting of Presidents of Prime Ministers of Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria and Mexico. These nine countries together account for three quarters of the world's one billion-plus illiterates and two-thirds of some 300 million children who either do not complete the primary cycle of education or do not even enrol in a school.

The 'most populous countries initiative' originated with

an invitation from Director General Mayor of UNESCO and Executive Director Grant of UNICEF to the Presidents of Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh, China India and Pakistan to lend support to the global efforts to fulfill the goal of Education for All set in the 1990 World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand.

The heads of two UN agencies jointly appealed to the national leaders to 'be personally and actively involved' in energizing the national activities in each country and lend their 'prestige and authority' to the worldwide effort. The collaboration among the nine countries was also seen as a means of sharing experiences and learning about creative approaches from each other in a south-to-south cooperation mode.

'These nine countries are fully capable of serving as regional and world laboratories and resources in the noble quest to bring education to all the world's citizens', said Director General Mayor in his statement to the Beijing Meeting. UNICEF Executive Director, James Grant added:

'The global initiative in the nine most populous countries will provide world leadership in EFA (Education for All) as well as many inspiring examples of strategies and policies.'

The next preparatory event leading to the summit, in addition to national activities to refine strategies and intensifying programme efforts, is a meeting of Education Ministers of the nine countries at UNESCO headquarters on 3-4 June of this year. The working session will consider arrangements of the summit as well as substantive issues such as the nature and content of the commitments and plans of action the participating national leaders would adopt in the Summit.

The Education Summit of the most populous developing countries is expected to be held, in the last week of November, immediately following the G-15 Summit (a group of 15 heads of states and governments serving as the voice of the South on major North-South issues). India is the host of the next G-15 meeting which is held every two years. Six of the nine potential participants in the Education Summit also belong to G-15.

## French Elections — Difficult Cohabitation

by Arshad-uz Zaman

**T**HE crushing defeat of the Socialists and the Leftists in general, has once again brought France to practice what they invented as a modern system called cohabitation. Four years ago Socialist President Monsieur Francois Mitterrand had to share power with a right wing Prime Minister Monsieur Jacques Chirac. This time it is the nominee of Chirac — Monsieur Edouard Balladur.

The parliament this time will look very different from the previous one. The RPR of Chirac will have 247 seats compared to 132 in the previous Assembly, the UDF of Monsieur Valery Giscard d'Estaing will have 213 seats compared to 90, the Socialists have 70 seats compared to 275 in the previous Assembly and the Communists are down to 23 from 27. Thus the Right

has gone up to 484 from 263 and the Left are down to 93 from its previous 302. One remarkable phenomenon is that although the right wing has made an impressive showing in the Far Right of the noisy leader Jean Marie Le Pen, who has been carrying on a crusade against foreign immigrant, has been unable to win a single seat. Jacques Chirac's nominee Balladur is the new Prime Minister and he has formed a 29-member cabinet. From the present elections if the right wing emerges as the clear victor, President Mitterrand is gravely enfeebled. His party has only 70 seats in a parliament of 577. The storm signals were visible last summer. France held a referendum on

the question of adherence to Maestricht. The campaign turned out nearly as a vote of confidence on President Mitterrand. Many voters voted 'no', not against Europe, for France continues to be a sheet anchor of European unity, but against President Mitterrand. If you ask a French voter his reasons for disapproval of M Mitterrand, he would find it difficult to give cogent reasons. The fact is that M Mitterrand has been in power for 12 years and they have taken their toll. It is the same picture in almost all the western democracies — in the USA, in Britain.

M Mitterrand has two more years as President and it is very likely that his right wing

adversaries will not want to rock the boat. What is more certain is that the presidential race has already begun. M Mitterrand's age, health and recent defeat of his party takes him out of the race, although the Socialist will field a candidate and will no doubt endeavour to find a common candidate of the Left. M Jacques Chirac, who has been Prime Minister, has been long eyeing the top spot. The wind appears to be blowing in his direction. M Giscard d'Estaing has held all the important posts in the French administration including that of the President. He has managed to hold centre stage of politics for many years and will no doubt be a

formidable candidate. Corner columnists are particular favourites of the Turkish press and now with a plethora of private TV stations the news casters are followed by commentators. The columnists, specially the Left leaning ones, have been quick to point out to the Leftist parties in Turkey to draw a lesson from the French elections and unite under one banner. This looks highly unlikely for the Left and the Right are badly fractured.

Turkey is now governed by a coalition of Right wing party of Premier Demirel and Socialist of Inonu, the Deputy Premier. The Turkish media has also given prominence to the fact that the new French Premier M Balladur was born in Izmir

in the south-west of Turkey, strewn with Hellenic past.

The difficult cohabitation in France comes at a time when Europe is undergoing severe stresses. France and Germany have been the two solid pillars in the creation of Europe. Post Maestricht Europe is faced with numerous difficulties, not the least of which are the succession of scandals in Italy, a major player in Europe. In Maestricht the Europeans set their sights high. To navigate the European ship through the dangerous waters of the end of the century, Europe will need stability in France. The French voters have handed down an enfeebled President and strengthened the Prime Minister. Cohabitation, second time around will be more difficult than last time and undoubtedly fascinating.

## 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.

### Action for garment workers

Sir, The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its ratification has led to a high level of rhetoric and seminars not excluding drastic action by a non-ratifying country.

Harkins bill on banning imports from the third world using child labour is questioned by the garment factory owners as well as the child labourers for different reasons. The employer fears a considerable reduction in his profit. The child is threatened with employment and possible starvation.

Activists organisation like Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) initiated a joint press media action in collaboration with the garment factory workers' unions, NGOs and well wishers to start a campaign for relaxing the clauses of this bill.

The joint deliberations also suggested a phased out plan for an interim period for easing out the children. During this period the employers are to be persuaded to service education, recreation and health facilities within a few hours break in the work schedule. Research is also recommended to survey the occupation and status of the parents/guardians of these garment factory child workers.

It is likely that the American Senate will agree to this humanitarian formula as one of the conditions of the bill. It is also possible to hope for financial assistance for setting up such facilities within the factory premises.

In fact a small beginning has been made with Epoch garments whose establishment does credit in sending its girl factory workers for a half an hour recreation break at the

ASK centre next door.

The time may be right now for the Government and relevant NGOs to take their cue in organising a negotiable legal arrangement with the garment factory workers for the introduction of in-factory welfare services for the working child.

Ms Khurshed Erfan Ahmed  
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### Freedom of choice

Sir, Non-Muslims of foreign establishments in Bangladesh had been entertained by Bangladeshis with Ifar. Ifar — eating after dawn-to-dusk fasting — has apparently developed into a traditional fete among the Islamic rituals of this state's functions, and the holy occasion has also been made fashionably competitive by a few blessing-seeker who are better off with what are classified otherwise.

Inviting non-Muslims to a sacred breakfast at sunset must have helped improve the host's foreign relations, as do Eid banquets irrespective of the participants religious affiliation.

OIC member Bangladesh

has been able to maintain profitable extra-religious ties with non-Islamic states and has been experiencing pressures for Islamic governance as well alongside invigorating Islamic spirit that has already extended great influence on the society.

The society of a Third World state like Bangladesh's can be subject to re-evaluation, with a view to determining its state of civility, in which the freedom of choice inherent in Human Rights Declaration is what matters.

M Rahman  
Zila School Road, Mymensingh

### Islamic Law

Sir, Often certain ladies make statements which are not acceptable as per Islamic law. For instance, the Holy Quran has clearly related the law of inheritance for the Muslims. According to the Islamic law, man and woman cannot get equal share of the inherited property. As long as we remain Muslims, we cannot violate the codes of Islamic law.

There is no doubt that Islam has given maximum

honour and genuine status to the womenfolk. Time is not far away when both men and women all over the world will realize why in Islam certain things have been prohibited for the women. Every rule prescribed by Islam is meant for the greater good of the mankind.

M Zehidul Haque  
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### VAT

Sir, VAT was introduced about two years back through the national budget to rationalize the tax system and for widening the tax net. As an idea this is not bad. But in practice many snags and loopholes have already appeared. While the shopkeepers have increased the prices of all the relevant commodities on this plea and the buyers are also paying through their noses, only a fraction of the VAT is actually going to Govt. coffer. Rarely and buyer demands receipt from the shopkeeper and most of the shopowners naturally, can take this advantage and pay only a small fraction of the VAT to the Govt., if necessary, in conformance with some tax officials

As such the real beneficiaries of the VAT are the business class and maybe some tax officials, not the public exchequer.

It seems that something is somewhere wrong in the modus operandi. Hence it is time to ponder how to plug the holes, so that its benefit actually goes to the government.

Saleh Ahmed Choudhury  
Dhaka Cantonment.

### Kids for Saving Earth Club No. 33355

Sir, I am writing this letter for some help. On January 25 there was a letter ('Cruel method') printed your 'To the Editor' column. The address that was given below of that letter is it all right? I want to be a member of the club 'Kids for Saving Earth.'

I mean if I send any letter to that address, will I get any response? I am not sure about the address so I want your help.

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