

By Eqbal Ahmad

THERE has existed throughout history an ironic relationship between the past and the future. Those who glorify the past and seek to recreate it almost invariably fail while those who view it comprehensively and critically are able to draw on the past in meaningful and lasting ways.

By contrast, peoples and governments with an uncertain sense of the future manifest deeply skewed relationships to their history. They eschew lived history, shut out its lessons, shun critical inquiries into the past, neglect its remains but, at the same time, invent an imaginary past — shining and glorious, upon which are superimposed the prejudices and hatreds of our own time.

Thus for decades many Muslims viewed the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb as symbolizing the strengths and virtues of Muslim rule in India. On their part, Hindu nationalists presented the Maratha chief Shivaji as an embodiment of Hindu resistance to Muslim rule.

In the summer of 1990, I visited Ayodhya and Mathura while researching the campaign which militant Hindu movements — BJP, VHP, RSS, and Bajrang Dal — had launched to demolish the Babri Mosque and build a temple on the site which they claimed was the real birth place of Lord Rama two (or more) thousand years ago.

to it. Apart from books, colourful posters portrayed in graphic detail the presumed atrocities and heroism of the Hindu-Muslim encounter in India. Narratives in prose and songs were also available by the dozens on audio cassettes. It seemed impossible to stem this tide of invented, poisonous history.

The phenomenon holds also in Pakistan. There are, however, underlying differences between it and India. One is that during crucial periods of the history, governments have favoured the distortionist and actively discouraged historical research, instruction, and inquiry.

On a daily basis Islam and its history have been invoked in Pakistan for more than four decades. Yet, during all these years neither religion nor history has been accorded serious attention in this country either from the state or society.

Economic Reform Process

The World Bank has taken a critical view of the slow pace of economic reforms in the country prior to the aid consortium meet in Paris on April 25-26. The draft Country Economic Memorandum it has prepared and circulated to our Economic Relations Division juxtaposes the recent economic developments against the priority reform agenda and draws up the balance sheet.

According to the diagnosis of the World Bank, political commitment has been lacking behind measures such as services reorganisation, privatisation, activation of the private sector, financial sector reform and other allied structural re-adjustment programmes.

We understand 'political commitment' in its extended connotation of bi-partisan political understanding on such vital reform issues as wages linked to productivity, disinvestment of sick industries, entrenchment of surplus labour, privatisation of service sector organisations and 'depoliticisation' of labour-management relations.

Meanwhile we ask the World Bank whether the disbursement of 700 million dollars to-date out of the pledged 2.1 billion dollars for this fiscal year has been entirely due to the poor rate of aid utilisation in the country or there was something else to it.

What is a Library?

If Dhaka is a megapolis, Narail should not be a village. Now it is the headquarters of a district. Not only for that or for the formidable S M Sultan the place was quite well-known throughout this country and across the border in West Bengal.

The Daily Star on Sunday published a report on the plight of the Narail public library. The library was established in 1957 — nothing to compare with the 150-year legacy of the Jessore or Barisal libraries, but nothing either to be dismissive about. The start was modest — the founders Sharif Abdul Hakim and Abul Kalam Azad donating 250 volumes or the whole of its collection.

Now, 38 years later, the collection has risen wondrously to 300, at the rate of 1.3 a year. And the report says of these, 250 are for the use of non-adult readers. Even then a hundred eager readers crowd the place — to read the five newspapers that are available on its racks.

Perhaps libraries in all of the new district headquarters are in no better position. Are these joints libraries, in any sense of the term? There is, however, nowadays a welcome flurry of activity in the library division of the culture ministry.

The Incomparable Thumri Master

Death at 90 can hardly come as a shock. Still a pall of gloom descended on all of Sylhet on March 6 with the spread of the news of the passing of Phul Mohammad, the vocalist. As the maestro never liked to travel beyond his best loved and adopted town of Sylhet, Dhaka and the other centres of music did not come to know him at his true worth.

Born in the cradle of so many musical geniuses, Brahmanbaria, on maturing as a singer he chose, as his pasture Assam which then included all the big towns of the subcontinental far east. While Moti Mia — the gurubhai of Ustad Alauddin Khan reigned over the vast territory with his violin, Phul Mohammad did the same with his thumri.

Dhaka too was shocked by the news, fearing a namesake, one hailing from Murshidabad and settling down here soon after partition some 48 years back and earning through the long span quite a name as an accomplished teacher of kheyals, was perhaps dead. While we condole the death of the elder Ustad, we wish a long long life to the junior Phul Mohammad.

To the Editor...

Fees for American visa

Sir, Lately the local American Embassy has been charging 20 US dollar in Bangladesh currency from each applicant seeking visa. The practice is new for reasons best known to the embassy. Nobody should grudge paying a charge for visa as some other embassies also charge visa fee.

By the rule of thumb it can be safely guessed, given the ever-increasing number of US visa seekers, American Embassy here would be able to collect around five crore Taka annually. This money is paid by Bangladeshis and in local currency.

Abul Bashir Mohtuddin Dhaka Cantonment

The man from Moscow

Sir, Because we have to be in possession of our faculties, we perhaps wouldn't be able to amount as deranged as Mr Zirinovsky were we given to answer his remarks in New Delhi. But if the man from Moscow was not altogether 'out', he should jog his memory to read that Bangladesh was freed in 1971 not to become 'acquired' or 'annexed' by any other state.

Under his fancied 'broad-based agreements', perhaps he loves to see India in a role same as that played by Russia presently to Chechnya. But unmistakably Bangladesh is no longer a Pakistan, nor a Chechnya.

M Ghulam Mostafa 257, Elephant Road, Dhaka

Amar Ekushey — when?

Sir, The proud nation has just observed with due solemnity Amar Ekushey on 21st February throughout the country. The early dawn of the day this year too saw a silent flow of barefoot grateful millions

istani University. None of the 25 odd students there had an inkling of the issues which defined the first major schism in Islamic history — the Khawariji movement. None gave a satisfactory explanation of the Ash'arite doctrine and its place in Muslim theological development.

The history thus produced shall bear but a remote, formalistic relationship to the past, and provide no positive links whatsoever to the future. For the past is not being viewed critically or creatively in most post-colonial societies.

The author is a US based Professor of Political Science, who contributes regularly to newspapers in the Middle East and Pakistan. He sent us this piece by air.

Untying the Gordian Knot of Our Politics

A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS AND ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS

'At Stake is the Credibility and Survival of Democracy as a System...'

Kazi Fazlur Rahman was an Adviser in the Interim Government headed by Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. As a career civil servant, he served as Member of the Planning Commission and Secretary of various ministries including Energy, Education and ERD.

The Daily Star (DS): What, according to you, are the reasons for the present political stalemate? What is the way out? Please elaborate your personal views on what should be the next step.

Kazi Fazlur Rahman (KFR): The reason for the present stalemate is basically one — mutual lack of trust between the party in power and the Opposition.

DS: Everybody is talking about elections, but when it should be held — within the next few months, or later in the year, or at its schedule time, early next year? Suggest measures to be taken for the timing of your choice.

DS: How to ensure an independent Election Commission? What are the pros and cons of the EC Bill passed?

KFR: It is not how much independence or authority the Election Commission enjoys on paper, but how effectively it exercises the same in practice. It is doubtful if the constituencies of India or Sri Lanka bestow significantly greater power or authority, as compared to Bangladesh, to their ECs.

DS: How to formulate a code of conduct for political parties to hold elections? How to ensure the implementation of such a code?

KFR: A code of conduct is absolutely necessary. There are excellent models, already tested in practice, even in the neighbouring countries which could be adapted to our use.

DS: What are your views on the need for a computerised voters list and identity cards? Can we ensure fair elections without them? If we want them, what should be the time frame for elections?

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in the 19th century. Syed Ahmed Khan inquired loudly into the causes of Muslim decline, and sought to overcome it with reformist zeal. The little that the sub continent's Muslims accomplished in subsequent decades, they owed largely to his critical intellect.

Politics are at the roots of this failure. For politics shape the intellectual environment. Isolated, illegitimate rulers no less than sectarian movements employ history and religion as ideological weapons and manipulative devices.

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Looking back at March towards Independence

March 14, 1971

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto said that the Awami League had shown itself against discussion outside the Assembly, and its leader insisted on resolving all issues within the Assembly. In this context, Bhutto, asked why the Awami League had now come forward with four 'conditions' that were decided outside the Assembly.

Mr Bhutto said his party was still willing to sit with the majority in the Assembly to frame Pakistan's comprehensive constitution which would ensure the solidarity of the country and prosperity for its people.

Meanwhile, at a Press conference, the Baluch political leader, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, called upon president Yahya Khan to transfer power immediately to the leader of the majority party, before the commencement of the National Assembly.

Bugti also went on to criticise Bhutto, alleging that Bhutto had not even touched upon the constitutional crisis during his talks with Sheikh Mujib but had confined discussions to 'sharing power at the centre'.

Iqbal Tahiria Massod, a leader of the Bahawalpur United Front, addressing a public meeting in Karachi, urged the lifting of Martial Law and the transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people.

(Compiled by Rashida Ahmad)



KFR: Computerised voters list and identity cards will surely help. But it would be naive to assume that these will solve all or even the major problems.

to expect our own Chief Election Commissioner to have a try at it? It is a sad fact that most CECs in the Pakistan days and afterwards in independent Bangladesh had dismally failed to discharge properly the sacred responsibilities entrusted to them.

DS: We hear a lot about black money being a factor in the next election. What are your suggestions to make election funding transparent and accountable?

KFR: The most obvious solution is for the political parties to refrain from giving nominations to persons holding black money.

Election Commission has to be far more serious than in the past in enforcing the ceilings on election expenses and in scrutinising the sources of such funds.

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DS: Do you think that there should be some sort of political understanding between the ruling party and the Opposition to ensure a free and fair election? Is such understanding possible? If yes, then what should be the next step? If not, why not?

KFR: For the sake of the future of democracy and ensuring social and economic progress of the country, there has to be not only understanding but also active cooperation between the ruling party and the Opposition. The alternative is too grim even to contemplate. And as I have already mentioned, the basis for such understanding already exists.