

# FOCUS

## CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

### Needed Tolerance to Cope with Differences

by N Shams Chowdhury

CONCERN about erosion of traditional culture and discussions on national cultural identity appear to be common in Bangladesh. The former centres round the alien practices that are making inroads into various spheres of life. Many tend to blame, as a possible cause to the issue, the increasing interactions with people of diverse cultures. Modern communication developments, especially advent of television and dish antenna, have also added fuel to the fire (issue). People in Bangladesh find the world and people of diverse cultures at their doorsteps. The other people do not only speak different language but also have lifestyles and other cultural manifestations differing from our own, such as dresses, manners, food and eating habits, music and dance, recreation styles, customs and traditions. The young generation appears to be increasingly influenced by many of the practices; while to many, the ageing generation in particular, this departure from tradition is undesirable and causes concern. Discussions on national cultural identity stem from cultural loyalty: where to lay the cultural loyalty?

While many hold the strong nationalist sentiment that Bangladesh is the fruition of freedom struggle shared by its people of all religions, creed and diverse background, and thus it needs to have a common cultural pattern and tradition, without dominance of any group, and distinct and unique identity as a cohesive force to unite diverse groups in the greater interest of the nation; others view people of Bangladesh as sharing indivisible cultural identity based on common origin as well as distinct cultural traits with those separated by arbitrary boundary. Culture is very important for a society that forms the very basis for a common way of life with a particular pattern, regularity, and meaning; and stimulates national progress and development.

It is apparent that beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviour are the common cultural constructs. Belief orients an individual to his environment like person, group, institution, behaviour, policy, event, and so on; defining it and identifying for him its salient characteristics e.g., attribute, quality, outcome, event, etc. Attitude toward any object is a function of beliefs about the object. Attraction, sentiment, valence, and utility can all constitute attitude. Values may be considered as intervening between beliefs and attitudes. For example, the belief that Election Commission is or is not strong enough to conduct fair polls may lead to respectively favourable or unfavourable attitude toward Election Commission.

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### Alamgir M A Kabir: A Requiem

by Yasmeen Murshed

WITH the recent demise of Mr Alamgir M A Kabir the nation has lost a personality whose life exemplified the greatest traditions of public service. The satirical quip that "civil servants are neither civil nor servants" was totally reversed in his case because Mr Kabir's legacy is that of the old time civil servant who was gentlemanly and courteous and gave unstinted and selfless service to his community and country.

A very senior member of the Police Service, Mr Kabir retired as Inspector General of Police of the then East Pakistan to devote the rest of his life to voluntary social welfare activities. His association was closest with the Planned Parenthood Federation, Family Planning in general, the Lions Association, the Diabetic Association and hospital while he was also a member of numerous other welfare and social service organisations. In each office and on each committee he gave his undivided attention to problems and issues and undertook responsibility naturally. His painstaking attention to detail, his concern for the smallest event or person, his welcoming manner and warmth made him a uniquely loved human being. After his death many a person said "the thought of me as his own son or daughter" — a tribute which made him singled out individual and made them feel special.

Mr Kabir came from a family which has made other distinguished contributions to public life in South Asia and is well known for its devotion to intellectual pursuits

but he was perhaps unique in his gift for "the common touch". He was involved with human beings from all walks of life and would show genuine concern for the trials and tribulations which they faced. He never lost this interest in human beings or his concern for their welfare, and continued to advise, console and assist his relatives, friends and associates right up to his death.

As his nieces and nephews, we became aware very early of his genuine interest in all our activities — an interest which was extended down to our children. I was often astonished that he remembered so many details about the activities or education of numerous grand children, grand nieces and nephews and never failed to inquire about their welfare. His pride in their achievements was clearly conveyed to us all so that even these youngsters felt the warmth of his affection and concern.

In our modern world the "nuclear family" is the unit that copes with life, not the close-knit communities and ties of kinship which used to bind the fabric of our society together. Unfortunately, we are losing the special qualities of involvement with others, concern for their welfare, and the unselfishness of sharing and giving which gave many Eastern societies their unique character. The death of an individual who symbolised these qualities for me, and for many members of my family, serves to remind me that the memories we leave in minds and hearts is our only enduring legacy.

mission by someone who values democracy.

Whereas a belief may change with new information, values are relatively resistant to change, and depend upon various factors. Behaviour is the response or action manifested in specific mode of conducts or means chosen to satisfy a given need. Communication pattern, that transmits meaning through language, gesture, posture, etc., is also a significant cultural construct, and considered by some anthropologists as synonymous to culture. Different communication practices will generate different meanings for same message. Communication practices vary when culture varies.

Societies and nations face the same basic problems — social and physical — to survive and respond in their own ways and develop differing cultural patterns. The responses or practices in solving these problems in the best possible manner in terms of economics and technological, social structural and ideological aspects, can be grouped together under (i) distributive dimension

Diversity and Tolerance

Why there is diversity of culture? Or why culture differs? Anthropologists differ

**Despite numerous definitions and their differences, many would agree that culture of a society or nation, in general, represents a shared way of being, evaluating, and doing or practicing; encompasses ideology, social life, and economics and technology; is embodied in people, processes, and products; circulates through various institutional channels, and mechanisms; perpetuates its unique value system over the years from one generation to another.**

to explaining cultural diversity or differences; and a number of views are available, like, renaissance, human evolution, cultural diffusion and cultural ecology. Renaissance view presents two opposing views that there were many distinct and separate species of humans, rather than only one, each following its particular way of life; and that some species have fallen from a higher state of cultural development. Evolutionary view suggests cultures developing from a single primordial beginning became more complex and refined with human progress, and followed certain common cultural changes. Diffusion view attributed cultural changes to borrowing, or transmission of cultural traits from one society to another. Cultural ecology espouses similarities among groups living in similar means of dealing with these environments.

All these views, however, are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary to the understanding of cultures, and factors that shape or mould people's perceptions of reality and environment, beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviour. The factors, to name a few, are geographical location that influences settlement pattern; religion, political systems, such as monarchy, democracy, communism, etc.; economy and technology e.g., market, command, and mixed economy, level of industrialisation, and so on; kinship favouring individualism or collectivism, etc; education system either formal, informal and content level, etc; and are regularly interactive or interdependent.

Within a culture of a society or nation it is not necessary

on the basis of demographic traits or patterns, i.e., income, education, settlement pattern, etc., (ii) organisational dimension with cultural participation patterns, such as, family relationship, association, institution, etc., and (iii) normative dimension that are of behavioural patterns, i.e., attitudes, values, norms, etc. Because manifestations of traits or patterns are due to responses essentially to the same problems, a discerning eye can compare cultures, find similarities between them on the basis of one or a combination of the above three dimensions, and assert accordingly that there are cultures that are similar or dissimilar; and accordingly group together societies and nations.

Cultural patterns of normative dimension are more notable than those of distributive and organisational dimensions at low levels of economics and technology or industrialisation, or, the contrary is true with high level of economics and technology. Cultural patterns of distributive and organisational dimensions influenced by economics and technology are tending to become more similar across various cultures, while that of normative dimension though tend to maintain their cultural distinctiveness, however, do change. Economic and technological aspect is fundamental to and foundation to understand the other two cultural aspects, i.e., social structure and ideology.

Cultures differ from place to place and among smaller groups within a society or nation. Cultural disagreements and misunderstandings arise from the fact that culture conditions thoroughly

people's perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, attribution, communication and behaviour that lead to ethnocentric of prejudiced thinking. Depending upon differing background people perceive their own culture as superior to others, what they do is appropriate, and incline to attribute meanings to what others do as irrational or unsophisticated, or both. Ignorance of cultural differences and influences that give a particular group of people identity or uniqueness is the chief cause of misunderstandings among cultures and sub-cultures. What is needed is cultural empathy and tolerance to cope with cultural differences, establish fruitful cultural relations that will reduce conflict and clashes, stress and strain, and encourage cooperation among nations as well as subgroups of a nation.

Historically same racial background and language, or

fluctuates and changes from time to time and between generations. Ancient invasion or dominance of various forms have introduced new cultures that accumulated over and blended to original cultures of this region. Technological inventions and western changes in the 19th century, such as but not the least, railways and steam engines, air planes, factories, education and the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, propelled them from simple agricultural ways of life to complex industrial orientation with infiltration of Western values. Today's world of satellites, computers, and media impact; interdependence in economics, communication, and development; and increased interactions with foreigners, strong cultures, etc., have influenced their aspirations and changed profoundly ways and patterns of every aspect of their life.

Western orientation is conspicuous in their dresses, fashions, food habits, education, and social greetings, behaviour and communication at work place and various gatherings, etc., especially in the urban setting. Skilled workers like operators, typists, electricians, mechanics, plumbers, drivers, and many others are increasingly growing over that of traditional vocations, artisanship and crafts. People are more inclined to work in factories, mills, etc., than agriculture for their livelihood. There are increasing number of modern schools, factories; high-rise and skyscraper buildings; facilities and modes of transportation and communication; health, recreation and sports facilities; and banks and financial system. Women especially have emerged. Many women work in shops, garment factories, attend universities, practice professions, sit in parliaments and have become ministers. Most important of all are the changing social ideas and outlook of life. Democracy is burgeoning, the leftist doctrines like socialism and communism have many adherents.

Bangladesh, though inhabited by people who predominantly use a common language and are Muslim, also cradles groups of other religions, creeds, castes, communication patterns, and other traits and background; and has nourished them all through common historical past, physical environment, etc. Its need is to utilize the people constructively and satisfactorily to ensure national development and prosperity and cope with the fast-moving world. There is no way other than to motivate its people to culture a common way of life with a sense of belonging and an attitude of mutual respect to and/or learning best practices of other cultures, indigenous and alien, for harmonious and effective relationships.

### Bangladesh Context

Conflict with alien practices, clashes between ageing generation clinging tenaciously to traditions and the young imbued with contemporary development and aspirations, and controversies on cultural identity, are phenomena not new in this part of the world. The history the people have shared with the others of various races, creeds and regions who came with motivations like empire-building, exploration, and business and fortune-seeking, since the period predating even the Moghul till the recent past of the British bears the testimony of cultural con-

### COMMENT

## A Warmer World

by Claude Martin

**Glaciers represent a sort of natural calculator. What they are telling us now has prompted even the conservative and extremely cautious Federal Institute of Glaciology in Switzerland to conclude that the global climate is warming considerably.**

call 'open': bare of snow cover, just an expanse of blue ice pitted with gaping crevasses. In some cases, indeed, my familiar glaciers are not crossable at all, for the simple reason that they are no longer where they were.

As the World Wide Fund For Nature pointed out in an important leaflet last Decem-

ber, glaciers have shrunk by 30 to 40 per cent in surface area and 50 per cent in volume during the past century. And evidence from the UN World Glacier Monitoring Service suggests that the rate of shrinkage is accelerating. Since 1980, between 10 and 20 per cent of the remaining glacier volume in the Alps has been lost, indicating a situation poised to exceed the range of natural variability known over the past 10,000 years.

This is something of which mankind would do well to take note. Glaciers represent a sort of natural calculator, adding up over the years the effects of changes in temperature, whether natural or induced by the activities of our industrious species. What they are telling us now has prompted even the conservative and extremely cautious Federal Institute of Glaciology in Switzerland to conclude that the global climate is warming considerably.

For many of us, this comes as no surprise. Reports of climate change have been appearing regularly for the best part of 20 years and the current condition of glaciers — which, I emphasise, affects not just the Alps but the whole world — simply underpins the urgent messages about global warming that we have been hearing since the late 1980s.

We have, as I say, been hearing those messages. How we have been responding to them, and especially to the accompanying warnings about emissions of so-called greenhouse gases, is more problematic. Certain facts are clear.

## LEGACY OF WAR

### Quiet Despair of the Ghost Villages

Jo-Anne Velin writes from Knin, Croatia

Most Serbs fled their former Republic of Krajina when it was recaptured by Croatia last August. But few Croats are eager to move to the war-ravaged region, where Gemini News Service found a handful of mostly old and lonely people clinging to a harsh existence.

### New borders in the Balkans



THE villages in the part of Croatia that was called Krajina are no longer burning. The looters have gone, and now, five months later, many places resemble ghost towns. Dushka sits quietly in her home and waits. She lives in Knin, once the capital of the territory that Serb nationalists declared independent from Croatia in 1991 and called the Serb Republic of the Krajina. The region was recaptured by the Croatian Army in "Operation Storm" last August.

Dushka, 39, is one of the few who decided not to join the overnight exodus of almost 200,000 Krajina Serbs who fled to Serbia from the Croatian offensive and subsequent violent attacks on civilians and property. Now, only about 8,000 Serbs remain in the region, the vast majority of whom are over 70 years old.

Dushka lives alone. Her teenage children are in Serbia. Her husband died two years ago from kidney disease. She decided to stay because, even though she is a Croatian citizen, she feared that if she left she would lose the house that she and her husband built with money they earned during six years working abroad.

The Croatian constitution guarantees the rights of all citizens to retain their private property. However, tough bureaucratic hurdles were erected after Operation Storm that make it extremely difficult for Serbs living abroad to retain property in Croatia. The Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights says this deliberately undermines constitutional guarantees.

"What the Croatian Government is doing is illegal," says committee president Ivan Zvonimir Cacak.

Knin is a depressed, war-torn town that seems strangely hollow. Few children can be seen playing in the streets. Local authorities say most Croats originally from the town who were chased out by Serb nationalists in 1991 live elsewhere in the country or have left Croatia.

Croat refugees pushed by Serbs out of Banja Luka in Bosnia-Herzegovina dwell in war-damaged houses and flats. Most of these newly arrived families receive some financial support from Zagreb.

The picture is even grimmer in the countryside, particularly in the South. The rugged terrain around Knin is difficult to cultivate. For generations, the area was largely Serb and poor. No refugees from anywhere are moving in now. The hamlets lie almost deserted, blackened and barren. A tiny number of elderly Serb civilians chose to stay or were left behind by their families.

Treacherous roads twist their way to the burnt-out homes of Plavno Valley. Three old Serb women in one hamlet, Basnec, where most dwellings were de-

stroyed, are surrounded by few of the sounds of their previous lives — no children's cries, no motor engines, hardly any livestock; just the rain, their own voices and a clucking chicken.

Life is harsh. The women are Croatian citizens and entitled to old age pensions and social assistance. None of this can be obtained, however, because the authorities are ignoring them.

A Croatian non-government organisation, the Dalmatian Solidarity Committee (DOS), advises people living in the region of their rights to stay on their property and to receive a pension and protection.

Compared with the Croat refugees from Bosnia, these people are neglected by the authorities. They could become much more independent if they had their pensions," says Olja Simic, a DOS organiser.

Some humanitarian organisations maintain a small presence that is expected to continue after United Nations peacekeeping divisions pull out of Krajina in the next few weeks. They scour the empty villages, looking for who is left and offering them food and medicines. In Plavno Valley, Italian volunteers spread out among the villages to help the isolated old people with chores and words of comfort and reassurance.

"Maybe it helps the security of the old people," says one volunteer.

Many revenge attacks on Serbs and their property came in the immediate wake of "Operation Storm". These mirrored the raids of the early 1990s, when Krajina Serb nationalists ransacked and burned Croat property, and killed and assaulted civilians.

Reports filed by various official observers suggest that systematic and widespread human rights violations were carried out last summer by men dressed in Croatian military or police uniform. The abuses included cases of murder.

The local Croatian commander at the time blamed this behaviour on lawlessness, which, he said, he was unable to control. Diplomatic observers believe the claim to be largely disingenuous. Few of the crimes have been punished in court.

Dushka lives without community. A wood fire burns in the kitchen; an electric heater warms the living room. "My daughter phones me," she says. "Many people would like to return. Life is very bad in Serbia — no house, no money, nothing. But in Knin, no-one wants Serbs back. Look what has happened."

"They say I'm mad to live here alone. But how can I move to nothing?" she asks, gesturing towards the kitchen. "Here I have everything."

JO-ANNE VELIN is a Canadian freelance journalist based in Geneva.

### Clinton Urges Bosnians to Rebuild Sense of Community, Trust

PRESIDENT Clinton has urged Bosnian ethnic groups to reject their recent hostility and instead work together to rebuild their country and insure continued peace.

In a January 12 Voice of America broadcast to the people of Bosnia, Clinton reminded his audience the people of the United States from their own historic experience know "the hard work it takes to forge a community from a nation of so many different groups. More than a century ago, we fought a fierce civil war over

race and slavery." To this day, he said, "We still struggle with the legacy of that war."

However, Clinton noted that although the United States is home to many races, religions and ethnic groups, it has learned there are great benefits which come from finding common ground.

"Our nation," he emphasized, "is stronger and the lives of our people are more peaceful, more prosperous, more filled with hope when we bridge the valley of differences to become a real community."



### TOM and JERRY



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