

Prayer for 1998

We are no 'negaholic', to use the new word that has found entry into the English dictionary as an apt synonym for 'cynic' of the compulsive type. In fact, we may have been seen to be erring on the side of optimism peering at the moonlit beauty of the sky through the goalpost rather than the muddy patch at the ground level as the proverbial figure of speech goes. Even allowing for that kind of incorrigible good cheer, addiction for positivism and seeking out of chestnut from the fire, we cannot help citing marginalisation of parliament as one of our biggest disappointments in 1997, the year we bid adieu on this dewy morning of a fresh year.

The virtual impotence of the Jatiya Sangsad as the rock-bed institution of democracy in the continuing absence of bipartisan participation in its constitutionally mandated sessions has been an outright insult to the electorate and a breach of trust with them. They elected the 7th Jatiya Sangsad in the reincarnate phase of the parliamentary system with the hope that it would work normally by virtue of a conscious avoidance of the pitfalls of the 1990-95 Jatiya Sangsad. That minimum yearning has been dashed — until now at least. Arrears have piled up in matters of decision-making, legislative work, watchdog role of the opposition and answerability covenant of the ruling party and the opposition by way of jointly establishing representativeness and transparency of overall governance.

This has had a negative effect on the economy as well as on law and order and campus situations. The earlier expectations of an economic turnaround generated by some resolute policy pronouncements were belied as the year advanced. Portfolio investment crumbled with the DSE debacle and the FDI flows kept low.

Anti-corruption proceedings stopped on their tracks. Bangladesh Bank's laudable crusade against big loan defaulters petered out for lack of government support. Whatever may be the statistical variation in the law and order picture public confidence in the system of law enforcement, and rule of law as such, kept to a low level. The feeling of insecurity continued. Custodial deaths reflected adversely on the human rights situation.

Our prayers for 1998 are that the ruling and opposition parties have their finger on popular pulse and they immediately restore parliament to our national life. And, let the economy brace up to meet the aftermath of the great financial crisis in South East Asia which sends tremors to the world market of which we are a part.

Let Us be Rejuvenated

Come is the month of continence. Let it rejuvenate us as does an all parched-up *Jaishtha* before the renewal of all nature in Ashadh. Religion emphasizes the cleansing of the individual through the rigours of *siam* in Ramadan. We are here in need more of cleansing the collective entities — honesty and accommodation, efficiency and loyalty to social weal. Will those in politics refrain assiduously from thinking in pejoratives and vituperative about adversaries, for this one month, to start with? Can they? What kind of a *siam* will they be observing if they continue to wallow in ill will and dreams of rolling heads?

Shirking in duty and malingering in different garbs have come down as attending companions of Ramadan. The logic is to provide relief to the suffering caused by fasting. This is dishonest and is a travesty of religious injunctions. Keeping away from one's normal chores and duties on the plea of fasting can render the expected merits or *sawab* of fasting straightway into *makruh*. From government establishments to schools, from business houses to all industrial enterprises, timings are adjusted to make things easy for the fasting ones. Anyone seeking more from working still less will surely compromise his appointment with piety. In fact production and services should improve in Ramadan when there are fewer distractions.

Ramadan comes as redolent of pristine purities of the olden times. It lends certain regenerative strengths to those who go for it and practises *siam* as a *Sadhana*. But for those who can afford it, Ramadan also comes as a month of feasting and for some, unabashed gluttony. This is not only in utter bad taste, it is also a direct insult to the Ramadan spirit of self-denial. As if this was not bad enough, the government and the political parties have introduced a new culture of *iftar* parties — a streaming drain on collective coffers. This should go. The nation has every right to know about the money spent on these by government leaders and record their disapproval.

We plead to our readers, please have a kindly thought every day of Ramadan for the well-being of the society if you cannot at all turn in a good deed.

Dhaka Boi Mela

Contrary to the early signs, the fourth Dhaka Boi Mela, normally deemed as a prelude to the more adored annual arrangement of *Ekushey Boi Mela* at the Bangla Academy premises, ended last Tuesday with a note of success. The slogan for this year was 'Books for Children'. The kind of disarray the organiser of the event — Jatiya Grantha Kendra — seemed to be in at the outset few book lovers looked forward to the holding of this 15 day fair at all. In the end the organisers pulled it off quite nicely. Many of whom this fortnight-long bookfest at the Chandrima Uddyan attracted reportedly made it a point to pay a second visit — definitely a savoury revelation for the organisers; but does it have any impact in ensuring the future of a more or less easily accessible place for the fair?

Not any that we are informed of. In fact, for all the eventual success of the fourth book fair the future of the next one does not look any brighter. We believe this has got a lot to do with the lack of drive on the part of the organisers. This was evident in the fair itself, say, in the poor quality of the souvenir marking the occasion. We draw the attention of the ministry concerned in this respect. Instead of simply gracing the inaugural and concluding ceremonies of functions the State Minister for Culture and Sports would do well to use the weight of his office to fix the problems that dog organisers in similar ventures.

Bangladesh in 1997: A Year of Disappointment and Distrust

by M M Rezaul Karim

CHT issue is likely to fashion the course of political events in Bangladesh in the new year. Let us hope and pray for a better future.

A review of the past year's events in any country is a chronicle of achievements and failures of the government and private sectors combined that reflect the total well-being and progress of a nation. Government's role being preponderant in a developing nation becomes almost synonymous with the welfare or otherwise of the entire nation.

Bangladesh witnessed another year of turmoil in the past year. There was indeed some progress in certain areas, but they were relatively less in dimension. It was unfortunate, though it could be avoidable. That is why real democratic minded people are filled with despair. The distrust between political parties is being increasingly heightened. The spirit of understanding and compromise is giving way to a mood of inflexibility and confrontation. Let us examine the scenario.

The year commenced with the inexorable bickering between the two major political parties over the conduct of proceedings in the parliament. The principal opposition party, the BNP, continued to allege that their members were being discriminated against — they and their notices were being ignored, they were given less time and their microphone cut off, they were adversely televised and became victims of a partisan chair, etc. The ruling party did not adhere to the provisions of the 4-point agreement concluded with the opposition party at the behest of the Hon'ble Speaker. The Awami League denied the allegations. The BNP walked out of the House and has remained absent since. They advanced 14 point demands and stated that the atmosphere should be made congenial by accepting at least some of the demands so that BNP could return to the House. The government did not comply.

A principal allegation made by the BNP is the continued harassment, arbitrary detention, false police cases and even murder of BNP leaders and workers during this period. There is hardly any BNP member of the parliament against whom false police cases have not been instituted. The refusal of the Hon'ble Prime Minister to repeal the Special Powers Act which she was promise-bound to do also by declaring in the election manifesto before election has caused greater victimisation of political opponents. During the last BNP rule, the press section of the SPA was repealed, restoring total press freedom, and application of the rest of this black Act was much less rigorous than it is now. What was unique in this matter was that for the first time in the history of Bangladesh, the government was imposed monetary fine by the Supreme Court for undue harassment and detention of four former BNP ministers. BNP has resorted to hartals, but much less formidably than the 173 days of hartals, seizures, etc. resorted to by the Awami League during the BNP regime.

In the economic fields, the record portrays a dismal failure. The prices of essentials are soaring, unbridled. Income of the general public is dwindling, specially in the face of rising inflation. Income generation activities through micro-credit operations are yet to produce the desired result. Unemployment is on the rise. Normal criminal acts are keeping pace with economic deprivation. Energy sector and the civil aviation system are in the doldrums. Electric load shedding has assumed unprecedented proportions and rise in the price of electricity and petrol raised people's consternation. Farmers hardly retrieve cost of their produce, hiking of the price of fertilisers being a chief ingredient for this shortfall. Industrial production stagnated and labour unrest is rampant. Small scale industries as well as small chicken and fish farmers are on the way out, facing stiff competition from smuggled produce from across the borders. Even jugglery of figures by government

agencies could not reduce despair and hardship of the common mass of people.

The high-profile investors' forum became a disappointment for the government. Commitments in general sectors were much less than desired. Net investment was so insignificant that the government feels shy to publish it. There is, undoubtedly, promise in the future development of gas exploration, which had been initiated by the previous BNP regime. The foreign investors preached a sermon to the government as to what to do and not to do in order to bring about political stability in the country and restore confidence of foreign investors.

In the financial sector, the disaster was perceived from the days of the stock market crash, which siphoned away hundreds of crores of taka in foreign exchange from the country by unscrupulous manipulators. This happened primarily due to the refusal of the government to act on the advice of BNP legislators not to lift the lock-in system. Those responsible for it as well as heavy loan defaulters are scot-free and roam the streets proudly. The aid commitment has been low, as its utilisation was lower before and is expected to be lower still in the coming year. The Central Bank lost its respect and independent role. The government has failed to implement the recommendations of the Pay Commission as promised and to settle differences among government cadres.

The financial index is low. The value of money has eroded three times more in the 18 months of the Awami League rule compared to the 5-year BNP regime, without registering corresponding increase in exports. The foreign exchange reserve has frequently dropped to dangerously low level, invoking help and rescue by the IMF. Liquidity of banks has dwindled and became more precarious by heavy government borrowing necessitated by low collection of government revenue. Banks almost literally refuse to grant loans to businessmen by giving genuine or fake pretexts.

On the other hand, there were, indeed, some notable achievements. It was more perceptible in highlighting the noble spirit and heroic deeds of the glorious War of Liberation. The visit of the three world statesmen to share our joy in celebrating the 25th anniversary of independence gladdened our heart. Bangabandhu's contribution to the liberation of Bangladesh was vindicated in no uncertain terms, though the active leadership given by the exiled Mujibnagar government somehow did not receive its due recognition. The trial of Bangabandhu's assassins is proceeding duly as a priority after repealing the Indemnity Bill, though this was not a priority of the Awami League and even did not find a place in its election manifesto. Some progress has also been registered in some social sectors, specially in education which also was made possible by following the lead given by the previous BNP government.

The most burning question with which the year 1997 ended for Bangladesh is the dispute between the government and the opposition, which now swelled to a seven-party conglomerate, over the recently concluded treaty on the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The bitterness and confrontation that ensued on account of this issue portends evil omen for the nation. That is why a peaceful and amicable settlement is an imperative need of the day. A solution can be found only by the goodwill and sincerity of the political leaders. And this can be achieved not through an acrimonious public debate which tends to harden stances of respective contenders, which are fairly known to the general public, but through cordial discussions in a small group without the glare of media publicity and preferably under a third party. This issue is likely to fashion the course of political events in Bangladesh in the new year. Let us hope and pray for a better future.

Bangladesh Economy — Prospects for 1998

by Shahed Latif

The key to the prospects of the economy during 1998 will be export led growth of manufacturing.

THE new year is always of fresh hopes and renewed aspirations. It is the time to forget the turmoil of the year before. First of January is always the day of a new beginning. Let us try again — that is the spirit: start of again, regardless of handicaps.

Human decisions make or unmake an economy. Omissions and commissions on the economic front are the key elements — unless the weather is too unkind. The year 1997 was rosy on the weather front. Therefore it was a year of bumper crops. However, in sectors other than agriculture, the performance were less than expected. An economy like Bangladesh should basically grow on the strength of the expansion of the manufacturing sector which again is critically dependent on the growth of merchandise export. No doubt, total export earnings have been growing but not at the desirable rates leading to the much sought after rapid increase of manufacturing outputs.

The key to the prospects of the economy during 1998 will be export led growth of manufacturing. Garments, textile, knitwear, leather goods, ceramics, fertilizer, and the more traditional jute goods and sea foods exports during the year will determine the course of the economy. In addition, if agriculture is able to sustain its performance of the last two years, the growth of the economy would be further boosted up. However, we cannot put too much hope on agriculture.

The mainstay of economic growth ought to be manufacturing in 1998. How far is it feasible? We must remember that the world economy has dramatically changed in the later part of 1997. The rising wage cost combined with stable foreign exchange rates in South-east and East Asia, promoted the export of labour intensive goods and services from Bangladesh. This is no longer true today. The exchange rate in Thailand, Indonesia, Republic of Korea as well as in our neighbouring South Asian countries have all dramatically declined during the last four to five months so that in dollar terms, the competitive advantage that we enjoyed thus far no longer exist. For our exports, we will face much more competition.

The very first thing that the government must do is to review its exchange rate policy. Only six months back, our currency in dollar terms was 40 per cent cheaper than Thai Baht. Today they are at par. How can we remain competitive, unless other costs can be reduced? Prospects of such reductions are very limited. The only alternative therefore is to reduce the value of Taka. Otherwise, it would be difficult if not impossible to maintain the competitive and expand our exports at the desirable rate.

Devaluation has several other implications. First the price of petroleum products and vital import costs will increase. By no means subsidy from the budget is possible to sustain rising cost of fuel. At the moment, the world price of crude petroleum is falling. It should therefore be possible to buy cheaper fuel in dollar terms and undertake large-scale conversion to compressed natural gas (CNG). The combined effect of these two measures should soften the impact of devaluation.

The reality of the world economy can never be avoided and therefore any delay in ensuring a more realistic exchange rate would have direct implication in terms of the rate of growth of the economy. The international financial turmoil of past few months have some other negative influence for the national economy. The expected foreign direct investment from South Korea in export manufacturing may not be forthcoming during 1998. Private Japanese investment will also fall. Under the circumstances, it will be necessary to promote domestic investment much more. It should be obvious that unless Bangladeshi investors come forward, foreign investment will always remain far behind. But the BOI tends to behave in a manner which implies that its role is confined to foreign investment only. This must not be the case.

In order to overcome the investment crisis of 1998, BOI should immediately put forward an

action plan, first of all, setting out the measures to promote domestic investment in manufacturing sector alone. There is no need to get involved with energy sector investment. Those should come regardless of prevailing global financial crisis and economic downturn in Japan.

The silver lining on the export front is the strong economic growth prospects in Western Europe, USA and Canada which means that increasing exports from Bangladesh to these countries can be sustained. These are also the main markets for our manufactured exports. The biggest event of 1998 is going to be the opening of the Bangabandhu Bridge across the river Jamuna. For the first time in history, the great physical barrier between the two halves of the country is going to be removed. It is the greatest event since independence of Bangladesh. The consequences of such an epoch making event are going to be revolutionary and the economic revolution will only begin in 1998. First, the prices of agricultural products exported from North Bengal will decline. It would lead to agricultural diversification: vegetables grown in Thakurgaon and Gaibandha will easily reach Dhaka and supplies of all sorts of fresh produce will be vastly augmented. We can expect that next summer, supply of mangoes from Rajshahi will not only increase but its quality should also improve. Although the world market would continue to remain the mainstay of the economic growth, the growth in the domestic markets due to the bridge across Jamuna is also going to be substantial.

The other big events of 1998 belong to the energy sector. It is expected that early in the year, negotiations relating to exploration and drilling for oil and gas will be completed and also the contracts with independent power producers will be signed. Consequently, we may expect a huge inflow of foreign investment which in turn would have a multiplier effect on the construction sector as well as other sectors of the economy. The year will mark the beginning of the grand energy sector development and its full impact should be on stream by the year 2000 in full force — well before the next general election.

Provided the government does not shift its policies, the role of the private sector will expand considerably in the telecommunications, airline and transport business. By the end of 1998, it is expected that use of mobile telephone should become fairly widespread. Similarly, private airlines may dominate the internal market and the opening of the Bangabandhu Bridge will lead to rapid increase in bus and truck services, most probably across the border to destinations in India. These are significant development, particularly in terms of their contribution to GDP in the fiscal year 1998-99.

What will happen to economic reform? I think it is now anybody's guess since the overall speed of the reform process as whole have slowed down in the recent past. There are hard decisions involved and the time is running out. After 1998, there will be no time for politically difficult decisions like taking firm actions against loan defaulters, privatizing loss making public enterprises and getting the prices right. No doubt, widespread economic reform would generate strong beneficial effects on the economy and the party in power is bound to gain out of it during the next election.

During 1997, the water sharing treaty and the CHT peace agreement were the two landmark events completed by the government — regardless of the criticism by the Opposition. The favourable impact flowing out of the two agreements will convince the people and the overwhelming support of the people is inevitable within the next two to three years. Decisive measures for economic reform should have similar impact.

What will be most important for the government in 1998 is bold actions — without any fear and favour. Can we come out of a fearless and favourless Government of Bangladesh? If we cannot, we are doomed. It is the fate of the people which is at stake and the issue goes well beyond the tenure of a particular government.

INDIAN ELECTIONS

Polarisation Helps BJP

by Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

Political analysts feel that the BJP in power and the BJP in opposition may make a lot of difference as far as its approach on various subjects is concerned.

THE Indian elections are round the corner, and the heat and sound of the electioneering are palpable across the vast country. The polling will take place for several days in the length and breadth of the country sometime between the third week of February and the first week of March so that the new lower house of parliament (Lok Sabha) is constituted by March 15. The election commission will announce the firm dates of the polls shortly. But the major political parties or groups vying for power in the largest democracy of the world have already swung into election campaign and none wants to be seen as lagging behind another in this regard. They are holding their conclaves to draw up strategies and also finalise the nomination of their party candidates. In the process, this is the time for alignment or realignment of the political forces keeping their eyes on the coming polls.

The political parties are busy in having open as well as secret talks with different fellow political organisations where they could reach political or at least election understanding. This has become more serious since experiences have shown that India is unlikely to have any party or group enjoying absolute majority in the 543-member lower house in the coming elections and another hung parliament appears a certainty unless the voters swing in the last phase of the electioneering for a decisive mandate for a particular party or group. While no clear winner in the polls is expected which means

no party will secure the number of the seats that would enable it to govern the nation by itself, none can also totally rule out that no party will ever get this crucial absolute majority. In any case, one party or group has to be the single largest group in the new parliament even if none secures an absolute majority and in this situation the single largest parliamentary party will, in all probability, get the first chance to form the government. Thus the key players of the political spectrum are seeking to enlarge their electoral strength from the pre-election condition so that they will have the advantage to form the new government. As such it is no surprising that new and newer alliances are cropping up in the Indian political scene and at times these alliances seem utterly strange because such alignment appeared somewhat inconceivable even a few days ago.

When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) goes into an electoral understanding with the All India Anna DMK in the southern Tamil Nadu state or this party and the Janata Dal faction of late Orissa heavyweight Biju Patnaik coming closer or more bizzare as it may, Syed Abdullah Bukhari, son of the Shahi Imam of Delhi's

Jame mosque, throwing his support for the BJP which is hitherto known for its extreme communal overtones — this may initially come as a surprise to many or even shock to some, but none should really take this as a kind of bolt from the blue or something like totally unthinkable in politics. Because nothing is permanent in politics and adjustments or understandings are possible between diametrically divergent groups based on the conditions and peculiarities of the ground realities. And this more happens when no single party or group can command the required majority necessary to form a government either in centre or any state in India. As such, when the BJP succeeds in taking away a sizeable number of Congress from its arch rival in the largest Uttar Pradesh state to help survive the state government, this might have sent tremors down the spines of the Congress but should not be construed as a total surprise in politics. Like the once avowed socialists like George Fernandes and others favour communal BJP in preference to secular Congress, this too seems strange but once again politics is a game of unpredictability. Even when the firebrand woman Congress

leader in the West Bengal state Mamta Banerjee quits the party and expresses desire for electoral adjustments in the state with the BJP, this may appear to shatter all calculations of the political pattern. Nevertheless, all are a part of the game. As the pre-election scenario in India is getting more and more interesting and also complicated, there is no denying that the BJP is emerging as the most potential force to gain power through the coming polls. The party has shot into prominence from relative obscurity within a short span of hardly ten to twelve years and now seems well set to be in power after the next elections. Not that the party was not in power as it did govern India but only for the briefest period in country's history — for twelve days — after the last general elections by dint of its being the largest party following the balloting.

The political organisation that has spread its influence in quick time, particularly in the Hindi heartland which constitutes bulk of the members in the lower house, is now making a desperate attempt to come to power with such a parliamentary strength so that it can remain in power for a reasonable longer period if not for the en-

tire five-year term. BJP knows its limitations like reservations by the minorities for the party and as such it is wooing the Muslims and other minority groups. The party lost all sympathy of the Muslims when its state government in the Uttar Pradesh a few years ago virtually presided over the demolition of the 'Babri mosque' in Ayodhya which BJP and other religion-based organisations claim was built on the birth place of Hindu God Rama. The developments that followed sent the state government packing but the party appeared as more aggressive on the Hindu nationalism. But with the new elections drawing nearer, the BJP has changed its strategy and is seeking to expand its support base. It knows that only emerging as the single largest parliamentary group will not be enough for being catapulted to power as it happened last time and as such it needs supports from outside its traditional vote bank as well.

The BJP has one advantage despite its communal character and it is a liberal and attractive leader like Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who is being projected as the Prime Minister should the party come to power. He was the Prime Minister when his party formed the government in early 1996 following elections. The BJP organised a convention for the Muslim leaders no sooner the previous lower house was dissolved and fresh election dates announced, and assured the Muslims that they have nothing to fear from this organisation. It has succeeded in drawing support from the Muslims to some extent by this time like former state minister and national hockey star Aslam Sher Khan of Bhopal joining the organisation and the son of the Imam of the Jame Mosque of Delhi extending support for Mr Vajpayee.

BJP has taken this move in a very calculated manner as its policy makers made it out that in the last elections it lost in thirty to forty seats by narrow margin and might have won these seats if the party secured

only twenty per cent of the Muslim votes in those constituencies. BJP's move is to soften the attitude of this party towards Muslims and in the process win their confidence. As such, during the recent party convention in Orissa, BJP made no references to its commitment to build the 'Babri mosque' was demolished. At the same time it is also sparing no efforts to win unlikely friends as it has already done in the Tamil Nadu by aligning with the former chief minister charismatic Ms Jayalalitha and the son of late Biju Patnaik in Orissa. It has already set up good ties in the Sikhs' 'Akali Dal' in Punjab and the Samata Party in Bihar. Several former senior army officers have also joined the organisation. 'We are receiving good response from all quarters including the minorities' said party spokesperson Ms Sushma Swaraj.

However, everything cannot be fine with the BJP and there are also thorn in the bed of roses. Only some individuals' support may not necessarily help win the Muslims' confidence for the organisation because it had also before Muslim leaders like Sekandar Bakht and Arif Beg in its fold but this did not help much in winning minority votes. Besides, the popularity of the BJP stems from its solid communal base which it does not want to erode at the cost of wooing the Muslims too much. So the party is not also abandoning its 'Hindu-vata' campaign but is showing more accommodation with the Muslims. Political analysts feel that the BJP in power and the BJP in opposition may make a lot of difference as far as its approach on various subjects is concerned.

It also depends on how much its two main electoral rivals — the Congress and the 15-party coalition United Front — shape up before polls. However, the polarisation so far taken place in India has helped the BJP. It remains to be seen how far the party can improve its possibilities to come stronger through the coming polls. The regional parties are playing an important role in the Indian politics as gone are the days of single party taking command at the centre and also in most of the states. BJP is also seeking supports of the regional groups. The party is making a desperate bid to storm into power in India.

To the Editor...

Punishment for criminals
Sir, Recently in Barisal, Sabuj and his three accomplices threw acid on Helena, a student of class six, after she refused Sabuj's marriage proposal. Still Sabuj and his other two accomplices are absconding.
We expect that the criminals who are involved in repression of women like acid throwing, burning, killing on various grounds shall promptly be arrested, tried and punishment awarded to check repetition of crime of this nature.
I want to pointout that it is

the sacred duty of government to ensure peaceful living of all the citizen of the country.
Mastafa Sohel
Banani Dhaka-1213
Unlearnt lessons of Ramadan
Sir, The fasting month of Ramadan comes with many lessons for us. It teaches us to use restraint in every sphere of life, understand the physical suffering of the people around us who are not fortunate enough to have square meals. But we fail to grasp the essence of fasting.
Iftar has now become a so-

cial event where we indulge ourselves in lavish spending on comestibles. Parties are organised and enjoyed almost throughout the whole month thus deviating from the true spirit of Ramadan.
Should we not realise and act upon the basic sanctity of Ramadan? Can we not extend our helping hands towards the other fellow human beings who are deprived of happier moments in life?
At least we should give it a try.
Tanzila Chowdhury
39/C Chittagong Cantonment
Chittagong.
A Citizen
Fulgan, Kaptai

Border traffickers
Sir, It seems that the DS has taken an attempt to apprise the nation of the trafficking system through 'Benapole' in Jessore. But I'd like to further inform that there is another place 'Hilli' near Dinajpur.
As far as I know, through that point people easily cross the border with the help of local agents known as 'dalals'. These dalals have connections with the officials concerned and even with those who guard the border-line both in Bangladesh and India.
A Citizen
Fulgan, Kaptai