

A Happy Pahela
Baishakh to All

Today is Pahela Baishakh, the Bengali New Year's Day. How does it contrast with similar days on different calendars and among different peoples? The Bengalees have cut out a distinctive and profoundly evocative celebration of their new year.

There is, however, a misgiving in many minds as to the reality of the Bengali calendar. Is it all a contrivance, however helpful politically and culturally? The educated urban population may feel so for they use the Gregorian calendar, together with the rest of the world — universally. But all their connections in the villages do use the Bengali calendar and perhaps will continue to do so as long as the Bengal peasant has his way in the production of his crops.

We are not alone in proving our traditional calendar. We know about the Chinese keeping to their own calendar. So do all the ancient peoples of the East. Through a pleasant historical turn, the Bengalee people, by observing the Baishakh as a national festival, have entered a club of nations peopling half the world from the Caspian Sea to the Japanese isles — nations who celebrate the same Baishakh as their national festival.

On the occasion of the Pahela Baishakh it will be fitting to resolve to be more caring and loving of our culture than we have so far been. Let us in the new year strive to become truly cultured persons — the essence of that being in becoming decent human beings. Decency born of culture can heal many of the maladies now afflicting our national life.

A happy Pahela Baishakh to all.

Let There be Debate

The Chittagong Hill Tracts bills have been formally introduced to the Jatiya Sangsad. Dogged mostly by prejudiced acrimony rather than informed opposition the historic CHT Peace Accord is in the last phase of its journey towards implementation. After detailed discussion, the Parliament will put the legal stamp on the framework which seeks an answer to the long insurgency problem in the hilly region of country's south eastern part and the disputatious relationship between the tribals and the Bengalees.

We believe the Peace Accord is too big an issue to put through the run of the mill procedural course of the House. Let not time factor or other rules which are more of ritualistic value than anything else mar the spirit of debate. And the whole session should be televised unedited for the comprehension of the public. Politicians must remember the Accord, in its totality, is too complicated and vast for common people's understanding. It is through them that people can see the bad or good of it.

The trend in any discussion over the peace deal has so far bordered on bellicosity and prejudice. For all practical purposes all we have come to know about the contrary point of view is earful of philippics and unexplained rejection. Even when there were attempts at particularisation of things, reason looked so hopelessly trapped in clichés.

The CHT Peace Accord is a very important event in our national life. And Parliament certainly is the place where issues of such great national consequence should be thoroughly debated. Despite the resonant and widespread commendation there is no denying that the Accord has its own share of weaknesses. But they can only be brought under the spotlight through detailed discussion and informed debate. Let your argument be the tool for people to form their own opinion.

Treating Rape Victims

It was not before good three hours that little Baby, a ten-year old rape victim could be provided any treatment. Reason? As a Daily Star report indicates is the inadequacy of equipment. Our medical facilities are woefully short of the expertise and equipment to treat minor rape victims. At a time when we have to wake up every morning to widespread sexual perversion and horrific details of child raping, this is no doubt a news for concern. We demand the authorities look into the matter immediately and furnish the hospitals as completely as possible to address the injuries inflicted by a social evil that seems to have broken out with a vengeance.

The real lacking, however, seems to be more on the plane of attitude than equipment. Young or adult, the society is appallingly cruel to a rape victim. We wonder if any of the hospitals in our country have the facility for psychological rehabilitation of a rape victim. From the investigating officer to the attending doctor every professional group she comes across in the aftermath of the ordeal is monstrously insensitive to her trauma. Everywhere the impression that prevails is one that of treating with a human being who by one fell stroke has been reduced to heap of tainted flesh and nothing else. It seems a woman who has survived rape does not have to have shame or any sense of insecurity; to be raped is to be relieved of all human considerations, physical and mental. She can be the subject of lurid detail in the newspapers; she can be toyed with even if it is for the sake of investigation or treatment.

We believe as a society we have to grow up immediately to accommodate the sufferings of the rape victims. We must make sure that in our zeal to fight rape as a social phenomenon we do not end up adding to the sufferings of the unfortunate victims.

STABILITY has eluded South Asia ever since the liquidation of British raj in 1947, and emergence of two independent countries India and Pakistan. While neighbouring South East Asia marched towards economic prosperity (though at present the region is in economic crisis, its recovery is expected through the help of international community) and regional integration, South Asia remained fragmented both as a regional entity, despite the existence of SAARC, and as national entities as well. The results have been disastrous. The region, home of almost a billion people, has remained as one of the depressed areas of the world. Hunger, poverty and disease still stalk millions, and problem is gargantuan. A few simple facts actually reveal the enormity and depth of the problem facing South Asia.

First, education, considered to be the factor in human development, is sadly lacking. South Asia is entering 21st century, in an age of high-tech skill like computer software, bio-technology, informatics, fibre-optics and electronics, as one of the most illiterate regions of the world. It allocates lowest per cent of the national income for education. As a result, 50 million do not attend primary school. Another 60 million drop out every year. The impact of illiteracy is reflected in millions of unskilled labour and resulted in educational deprivation among the girls and women. It has 243 million illiterate women who represent two thirds of the region's total female population.

Second, according to the International Food Policy Research Institute the 'food gap' in the developing nations in a quarter of a century will be far larger than expected with South Asia and sub-Sahara needing vast grains of imports.

Third, the environmental degradation in the region within a quarter of a century may result in acute inter-state conflicts.

Lastly, while the South Asian economists are still struggling to formulate region's

Search for Stability in South Asia

In South Asia politics is still the sole prerogatives of the states and unless they act nothing gets done. Since politics is the primacy of all economic activities in South Asia a visible willingness on the parts of its leaders should be there to begin a positive trend and a process.

own development agenda, the European Community (EU) officials are apprehensive that India, Pakistan and Bangladesh may become the 'sick men of Asia'.

What do we have here from the above scenario? A common thread running through all the factors demonstrate that South Asia may be in danger of missing out on significant new opportunities generated by changing international environment. The South Asian nations may become the 'sick men of Asia' because we do not have our own agenda neither to help each other nor avail these opportunities. We should have had that agenda at the very advent of changing international order from bipolarity to multipolarity and easing of East-West tensions. We should have worked for it through regional peace and stability. Instead we remained interlocked in inter-state and intra-state conflicts. Without peace and stability we can never expect to have our agenda — development or otherwise. How can we then hope to deal with international community, and who should we blame if we have to depend on the reform measures suggested by foreign institutions which may not be entirely suitable for our needs?

What then are the sources of instability in South Asia? It was assumed during cold war that once the impingement of superpower complexities on South Asian international system was gone it would become stable, peaceful, cooperative and harmonious. Unfortunately that was not to be. Because the sources of instability in South Asia have been many besides the external factors. The internal dimension of instability was not seriously taken into account in the context of the bipolarity of the existing world order. With the end of the cold war the stark realities came to the fore. We have to realize that an insatiable South

Asia has not been the creation of the super and major powers alone, we South Asians are in many ways responsible for it as well. We have to stop blaming others, look inward and put our house in order.

The root cause of regional instability and lack of cooperation among the South Asian nations is the bitter and acrimonious Indo-Pakistan relations. The underlying and sole factor for such phenomenon is history and history alone. Granted that without past there is no present. But there was not need to dwell on history in a negative manner only. Misinterpretation of history resulted into the breakup of the subcontinent in 1947 into two sovereign countries — India and Pakistan. But

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during his three-day official visit in Bangladesh following the Business Summit in Dhaka in January this year. Indeed a number of positive initiatives were taken by the Pakistani prime minister including settlement question of the stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh and settling the assets/liabilities between his country and Bangladesh. But his statement implicating India as an adversary for Pakistan and Bangladesh could not be appreciated, and stirred up controversial debates about his intentions. The goodwill generated by the positive initiatives soon relegated in the back burner while accusations and counter accusations soon took

integrate ethnic minorities were not developed. As a result, internal upheavals within each nation state have been of serious concerns.

Due to socio-cultural identities and political linkages with the affected groups the neighbouring countries have taken advantage of the situation and meddled into each other's internal problem. The insurgencies in Kashmir, Sind and Sri Lanka are cases in point. The similar situations in Assam and Tripura, however, are the examples of alienation of the minorities due to skewed development process.

These domestic sources of conflict can only be arrested if proper emphasis is placed for better socio-economic future for the disaffected groups. The natural corollary is to allocate more money for social development instead of defense expenditure. It has been repeatedly stressed that South Asia must spend more on education if we want to catch up with the rest of the world. The scarce resources are not only needed for domestic socio-economic development but also a time has come when South Asian nations need to finance each other's developmental process. India, being the core country, has more responsibility because without equal social, political and economic development of its neighbours it can never expect even sub-regional economic integration let alone regional one. In reality, however, there have been more talks rather than any actions. As a matter of fact both India and Pakistan are still spending their meager resources on defense instead of doing otherwise.

Actually to one's dismay Pakistan has recently conducted 'successful' flight test of its new surface-to-surface missile 'Ghauri' with a range of 1,500 kilometers and a payload of 700 kilograms while Indian

Defense Minister has declared that India would increase its defense expenditure in its next budget. Interestingly, he made this declaration at the end of his five-day tour of troubled northeast where 50,000 have died since 1947, and after comprehending that 'economic underdevelopment is the root cause for the growth of insurgency and the feeling of alienation'. Isn't it then an irony that the leaders of South Asian states seem to understand the underlying factor for region's underdevelopment but still talk and spend their meager resources for defense build-up? Do they not understand that without the decrease in defense expenditure by India and Pakistan, there may be an impressive South Asian development agenda but that would remain on paper only? Is it beyond their comprehension that the minimum level of existing regional cooperation, generated mainly by NGOs and private sectors, is not likely to produce the desired outcome in real sense until the hard political issues are tackled?

The fact of the matter is that South Asia is still dominated by strong nation states with weak civil societies. This has been evidenced by the meager impacts on the decision-making process of South Asian states by much trumpeted Two-Track diplomacy initiated by the US. In South Asia politics is still the sole prerogatives of the states and unless they act nothing gets done. Since politics is the primacy of all economic activities in South Asia a visible willingness on the parts of its leaders should be there to begin a positive trend and a process. The sooner India and Pakistan realize the need for mutual cooperation the better for the entire region. Because India-Pakistan conflicts, so far, has remained the main stumbling block in achieving durable peace and stability in the region without which no meaningful development can be expected.

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Dilara Chowdhury

did it really end there? Unfortunately, it was only the beginning of a new era of confrontation between the two countries.

In spite of numerous commonalities and affections between the two peoples, political differences and hostility remained the main features in Indo-Pakistan relations which vitiated and poisoned any scope of cooperation and harmony in the region. As a result partition of the subcontinent in 1947 created far-reaching consequences for the entire region. The depth of its impact probably was less absorbed at the time than what is being felt even after fifty years of independence. The deep-rooted suspicions and mistrust, generated by history, of each other have dominated South Asian inter-state relations hampering any mutually beneficial relations.

Take the example of the recent statements of Pakistani

over the center stage. Such developments do not help create any conducive environment for cooperation, and one can easily discern that Indo-Pakistan adversarial relations do affect South Asian inter-state relations in a negative way.

The conflictual Indo-Pakistan relations have other serious ramifications as well. During cold war both countries spent billions of dollars for military purchase due to each other's perceived security threats and neglected much needed socio-economic development. As a result the nation-building and state-building processes in the region have been hampered. Consequently, development strategies have been imbalanced due to India and Pakistan's preoccupation with their hard national security issues. And proper institutions needed to channelise and

But for How Long?

by Dr. Khandakar Quadrat-I Elahi

Does the DEAL that the government and the opposition (G&O) struck out last month reflect the accusations BNP had made to execute hartals and to boycott JS? What does the DEAL exactly mean to common people? Why did BNP return to JS? These are the questions that the people of Bangladesh must seriously think about if they hope to avoid the political situation they would not like to see again.

Manik Miah Avenue — will be chosen for holding public meetings.

Based on this understanding, the main Opposition BNP will join the on-going session of Parliament by March 8.

To clearly understand what import and implication this DEAL bears for common people, three questions need to be examined: Does the DEAL reflect the accusations BNP had made to execute hartals and to boycott JS? What does the DEAL exactly mean to common people? Why did BNP return to JS?

I wish to examine these questions by analysing only facts and truths. The statements made by both the government and opposition, prior to and after the DEAL was concluded, are of little help: First, they hardly agree with facts and second, there are few reasons to believe that they were true.

Does the DEAL reflect BNP's accusations? BNP took its accusations to the street and finally boycotted JS in later half of 1996. It returned to JS after striking out its first DEAL with the government in January 1997; the DEAL only lasted for about six months. It has again returned to JS last month after making the second DEAL.

What were the fundamental points that the opposition used to justify its hartal and JS-boycotting activities? It had targeted its agitation programmes against three treaties that the government had signed: Ganges water-sharing agreement, road

transit agreement, both with India, and CHT treaty. BNP had justified its programmes on four major accounts: defending integrity and sovereignty of the state, (ii) they elect representatives to manage the affairs of the state on their behalf, some of whom act as government and some as opposition, (iii) the fundamental responsibility of the elected representatives is to formulate laws and to execute them justly, and (iv) elected representatives are accountable to the people — sovereign authority of the state.

In the DEAL — both current and the previous one — there is no mention of these issues; instead it concerns with terms that unquestionably protect and further BNP's political interests. Are the political interests of BNP same as interests of the NATION? If not, the people of Bangladesh must think seriously what their political parties say and what they actually want to achieve; they must question seriously the programmes and activities of all political parties.

What does the DEAL exactly mean to common people? If we believe in democracy, we must also believe in its fundamental tenet: All democratic states are founded by a SOCIAL CONTRACT. The CONTRACT is not between the ruler and the ruled; the CONTRACT is between individuals who are free and equal in their rights. The fundamental purpose of the CONTRACT is to guarantee all individuals freedom and rights to pursue

their own welfare.

The fundamental terms of the CONTRACT are: (i) people are the sovereign authority of the state, (ii) they elect representatives to manage the affairs of the state on their behalf, some of whom act as government and some as opposition, (iii) the fundamental responsibility of the elected representatives is to formulate laws and to execute them justly, and (iv) elected representatives are accountable to the people — sovereign authority of the state.

What does the DEAL mean to the common people of Bangladesh in light of the fundamental principles of democracy: justice, accountability and public welfare?

The first condition requires all cases brought against BNP's leaders and workers be withdrawn. There are two reasons, of which only one can be true. First, the legal allegations brought against BNP leaders and its workers are false. In this case, the government has clearly resorted to political harassment. Second, the cases are genuine; what BNP wants is to escape punishment and public humiliations and outrage.

Whatever is the truth, this condition violates the very fundamental principle of democracy: principle of just society. The DEAL has clearly made the laws of the country discriminatory: The government and the opposition, elected to formulate laws and execute them justly,

have placed their leaders and workers above the laws. Laws are for the common people, not for their representatives.

The second and the third conditions refer to accountability. The second condition guarantees membership of all BNP MPs in the parliamentary standing committees, while the third condition provides for the neutral and objective broadcasting of JS sessions.

True, these conditions may help BNP's MPs to better perform their responsibilities. But a serious question arises simultaneously: What is the standard of neutral and objective broadcasting? If this question is not settled, and there are few reasons to believe that it can be settled, then BNP has the opportunity to complain against the implementation of the DEAL. What does BNP mean by neutral and objective broadcasting of JS sessions? Does it mean the standard it had established during its rule?

BNP's desperate efforts to improve its record of public accountability brings forth another very pertinent question: Why has it been steadfastly refusing to participate in BTV programmes on public accountability? The two facts are highly contradictory.

The final condition relates to opening a venue for public meetings in the metropolis Dhaka. Dhaka City Corporation disbanded all public gatherings in the streets of the city. The reason most probably is

that public (political) gatherings create huge and serious public disutility. Our government and opposition have now found good reasons to subject the residents of metropolis to undergo that disutility. What are those good reasons?

Why did BNP return to JS? As the official opposition, it is BNP's obligation to participate in all deliberations of JS and raise 'all' its concerns and queries against government policies.

Did BNP return to JS called by its duty? Few people would believe that it did. The facts and the truth are that BNP returned to JS because of serious disagreements among its leading partisans that threatened its very existence. A powerful group of BNP partisans did not want to give up its JS-boycotting politics. Because the current political conditions, at home and abroad, are not favourable to them, they were defeated; but if situation changes, they will succeed to put off the DEAL, and the country will return to the situation where it was.

So does the story of BNP's celebrated return to JS go: BNP, the official opposition, has concluded a DEAL with government, based on which it ended its boycott of JS sessions. The DEAL hardly collaborates with the accusations it made to boycott JS. Then, terms of the DEAL violate all fundamental democratic principles. Finally, BNP has returned to JS to prevent its disorganization, not called by its moral obligation.

How long will the DEAL last? Not very long perhaps. Can we make a good guess?

The author, a former Associate Professor of Bangladesh Agricultural University, is now a landed immigrant in Canada.

To the Editor...

For a popular opposition

Sir, Recently the price hike, power disruption, rape and mayhem have been discussed by all. And what automatically comes after that is the condemnation of the government. I am not saying that it should not be like that — as a matter of fact that is the most natural thing to happen. Lately Khaleda Zia has been provoking people to create unrest. She mentioned in a rally that we should not wait for them to pull down the Government, we ought to start it ourselves. Is this a sign of healthy politics? Should you provoke the people to rebel when all your cards are down?

I think the opposition ought to change its strategy. And this not only applies to the present opposition but to the future ones too. The opposition would be more popular if they show care by working with the government when it comes to the betterment of the nation rather than be on the lookout to find them or create faults unnecessarily.

Masroor Ahmed Deepak Dhaka

Trawling is hazardous

Trawlers do not follow laws properly: the fact that they are supposed to stay outside the limit of 50 metres set for nor-

mal fishing boats. They also catch more fishes than their storing capacity and many of these fish are wasted. Internationally, trawling is said to be unfriendly to the environment and the developed countries are discouraging this system of catching fishes.

Newspapers are recently stating that more trawling boats may be available to the general public if the government approves it. I strongly recommend that this action should not be taken.

Arbab, Dhanmondi, R/A, Dhaka

In the heart of Europe

Sir, Genocide repeats itself in Kosovo as it did in Bosnia. The 15-nation EU is unanimous on imposing embargo on Yugoslavia and the US holds Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic responsible for such political invasion. But we urge them all to take quick steps to stop bloodshed in Kosovo. We demand the 'advocates of justice and human rights' to take measures so that such violation of human rights against the Albanians come to a stop — so that ethnic cleansing of Muslims are not seen to occur in any part of Europe any more.

Luna, Tanni, Tahmina, Lima and Shaolte BUET, Dhaka

National Telecommunications Policy

Sir, Our attention has been drawn to a news item published recently in various dailies under the above caption. In a seminar organised by Motorola recently at a local hotel, it was stated that a national telecommunications policy duly approved by the cabinet would be announced soon. According to the news item, the minister was further quoted as having claimed that, the telecommunication industry has already been opened to the private sector for investment with the objective of bringing changes in that sector.

We not only differ with him but strongly contend that the picture as depicted in his closing address is far from the truth and primarily a hogwash to appease the World Bank and IMF who strongly insist in their annual reports for lifting of government restriction and control on the telecommunications as well as other sectors.

To the best of our knowledge, few internet service providers (ISPs) as well as three additional cellular companies have been given permission to operate only after exercising some political influence. As the regulatory body, the T&T Ministry continues to exercise all forms of redtapism while deciding on the numerous applications for investment in other fields of

telecommunications business like VSAT, INMARSAT, etc.

Why does one require to bid in BTB tenders in order to operate cellular business of their own? Why don't the government apportion a fixed royalty and open the door for any company to invest in these fields and run their own business (as long as they follow the BTB guideline policy for operators — if there is one at all, of course)?

Helpless Citizens Dhaka

Beware of grainless harvest

Sir, This year there is extensive cultivation of Boro rice throughout the country. Farmers have given special attention to this crop to meet up the shortfall of aman crop. But it is apprehended, unless all the three major fertilisers are applied according to recommended dosages, desired yield may not be achieved.

While the government has fixed the distribution target of about 2.3 million tons of urea for 1998, but no target for phosphate and potassium fertiliser has been fixed. It has been left for the private importers who will import and distribute the same according to their convenience. To balance the use of over two millions tons of urea at least 5 lakh tons of phos-

phate (TSP) and 2.5 lakh tons of potash will be required.

I would like to remind the Ministry of Agriculture to be cautious so that farmers of the country are not to reap grainless Boro this time.

M A Laili 372/B, Khilgaon, Dhaka

Can do without it, but...

Sir, Kindly refer to a letter written by Mr Iqbal Shaida on March 20 on the question of apology from Pakistan for their atrocities in 1971. Mr Shaida suggests that since East Pakistan was a part of Pakistan, the Pakistan Army, comprising mostly from soldiers from the western part, had the legal right to crack down on the unarmed population of the then East to save the integrity of the country. He even suggested that atrocities committed during the World War II could not be compared with the 1971 crackdown.

The united India was a 'legally' a part of the British Empire. So the freedom fight by the Indians was illegal and the crackdown by the British, including the one at Jallianwala-bag, was quite legal and British Government should not apologise for their 'legal' action. We are aware that the Queen, during her last visit to India,

expressed her regret for what happened in the past in the British India.

United India was divided into two countries and Pakistan was not a natural contiguous country. Both parts agreed that they will form one country and will be called Pakistan. Soon the people from the East realised that although they were in majority, they are treated just like a colony of the West. The result of the 1970 election was due to this feeling.

People of the East, who were in majority, wanted to form the government at the Centre. The crackdown was only due to this. What started on the night of March 25, 1971 gradually turned into the liberation war. The seriousness of the atrocities was felt on March 25 night and until the end of the war.

Mr Iqbal is free to have his own opinion of not requiring any apology from his Pakistani Muslim brothers and may be Pakistan will never apologise to Bangladesh. Bangladesh could forgive Pakistan for what they did but never can forget the brutality. Bangladesh does not require any apology from Pakistan but it could have helped Bangladesh to forgive the Pakistanis and started a new era of cooperation.

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