

Baishakhi Vow

Pahela Baishakh comes as a breath of fresh air. There may be some dimming of the spirit due to political tensions, a pronounced degree of lawlessness, and the commotion over power and water supply crunches; but the celebrations are likely to go on undeterred by these negative factors. One wishes though these were not there in the first place so that we could approach the occasion with a greater festive mood.

What is so irresistibly appealing about Pahela Baishakh? It is apolitical, it is secular and it is versatile in its intimacy with and friendliness to life and living of the people of Bangladesh.

To take Pahela Baishakh's last-named hallmark first — its intimacy with life, that is — it has to be mentioned that this wonderful feature has two facets. One, the average man's life style in Bangladesh, specially in rural areas and the commercial parts of the urban centres, revolves around the Bangla calendar whose first day we are celebrating today. The peasants, craftsmen, artisans, weavers, fishermen, numerous small businessmen, all go by it. It is linked to production cycles, it is the ready reckoner for reading a season's transition to another. The rumblings of Kal Baishakhi or the seasonal tornado are being characteristically heard as an intimation of the dawn of Bangla New Year, but even there we have had a splash of rain to relieve us of the scorching summer as a precursor of the rainy season.

It is a truly secular occasion not merely in its origin dating back to Mughal Emperor Akbar's days but also because of the fact that it involves the interests of all communities — the Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, tribals and aborigines living in Bangladesh. The sub-cultures merge into one stream of life and culture, a setting that is inherently congenial to societal harmony and cohesion.

Such a magnificent occasion that helps to portray the cultural identity of Bangladesh in its totality deserves to be observed by Bangladeshi communities abroad not merely to project the better side of our image but also to build bridges to expatriate Bangladeshis. They should not be lost generations to us.

The stark realities of political confrontation, polarisation, lawlessness and criminality are creating all sorts of social imbalances primarily because the economy has been badly hurt. We need to take a fresh vow for uniting our ranks on a day like this.

Please Take the Road to Peace

Business leaders' call for a three-month moratorium on hartal comes at a time when the country braces for yet another spate of confrontational politics. With the donors' drive to get the ruling and opposition parties to negotiate having failed and another dawn-to-dusk hartal on the cards, the business community's concern is more than justified. While we appreciate the essence of their plea, we think the nation has waited long enough for them to come to terms with each other. They must now find a way out in much less than three months time. Relentless pursuit of confrontational politics by both sides has taken a heavy toll on the country's economy, let alone the lives lost through the incidents of political violence. The government's indifference to opposition's role has rendered the parliament ineffective. Opposition's inclination to settling the score on the street has not helped either. On the whole, the very essence of parliamentary democracy has been put to risk and people, in whose name hartals have been enforced, feel badly wronged. We strongly believe that time has come for an end to such self-destructive politics.

With the budget session round the corner and the economy somewhat in a shambles, parliamentary debates are imperative. At this juncture, the responsibility for a full quorum at the parliament rests squarely on the legislators' shoulders, irrespective of party affiliations. The ruling party must open up avenues for an effective opposition participation in the parliament, even if it means allowing them more time than the ruling party. At the same time, opposition parties are also expected to shrug off the combative attitude and seek solution on the floor of the parliament. They have often talked of politics for people, but, strangely, the issues they have on their agenda appear to have no bearing on the cause of the masses. They have often sidestepped burning pro-people issues.

Confrontational politics has so far given the people anything but prosperity. For the sake of the people, we solicit the leaders, both in ruling and opposition parties, to rethink their strategy, and put an end to the culture of hartal.

Predatory Politics

Parvez's death on Monday outrages us. Once again the ugly teeth of our violence-ridden politics is exposed. With a head injury sustained during the opposition-called 66-hour hartal in February, this 13-year-old boy, from city's Syedabad, was hurriedly taken to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital for emergency treatment. After wrestling with death for 46 days, he passed away ironically in a hospital without adequate medicare. Parvez is indeed another merciless sacrifice at the altar of politics, putting national leaders' patriotism in the dock.

In addition to fatal political implications, the 'care' he received during the last days of his life was conspicuous by its absence from day one as this newspaper had pointed out earlier on. The wretched situation in which Parvez was fighting for life demanded the best possible attention along with specialised treatment. For a dying person every moment counts. We hope Parvez is the last victim of such negligence.

It also is reminder to the political gurus that time for anti-life politics is no more, it has been discarded by people in no unmistakable terms. It is expected they take people-friendly steps now sparing future 'Parvezes'. If their politics continues to cost innocent lives, they are bound to register their names as villains in Bangladesh's history.

Human Development in Sonar Bangla

Education and health are the two key elements of human development. If a healthy person is educated, possessing employable skill and knowledge, then the person should be in a position to secure a job and lead a happy, well nourished life. Isn't this the end of all human development? If so, it does not seem to reflect the realities of life in Bangladesh today.

In the world of development experts and institutions, notably the World Bank and the UNDP, the most popular jargon these days is human development. UNDP, as the talk show among development institutions (since it has no money to finance development), has spent millions on consultants and papers to define, analyze, elaborate and theorize on human development. I could not understand this new-found love since every human being aspires to live well and eat well and that should be the ultimate end of all human development. So why should we re-invent the wheel?

To my utter amazement, I found out the other day that human development has become an entirely new concept, not in the global context, but within the narrow confines of our golden Bengal, human development has attained new dimensions. It has acquired a unique meaning, perhaps unheard of anywhere else in the world. Even when it is counter development in general, it may bring about rich dividends and therefore human development in particular to certain lucky individuals.

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life in Bangladesh today. I was told by a professor of BUET of a revealing story which strongly emphasized de-education as the corner stone of human enrichment. It is not a strange story and truth particularly in Bangladesh is very often stranger than fiction.

Early morning one day the mother of a third year chemical engineering student came to the Professor and urged him to convince her son not to give up his studies when he had hardly two years left to become a professionally qualified chemical engineer. He was a good student as well. The professor first wanted to listen to the details. Why he should give up his studies? Herein lies the vital seed of change — the conversion of our society from emphasis on education to reliance on de-education.

The third year engineering student had a friend who could not go up to the college. His scores were not good and up to 12th grade he had had enough of schools. But he must do something else instead. He must earn tons of money. So he must go into business. What business? He went around Mouli Bazar and found out in his utter amazement, that most of the traders there were also not very educated. Therefore his level of literacy should be adequate for

the business world but he needs money. Where the hell he is going to get the capital for his business.

This is another remarkable development of independent Bangladesh. Neither education nor money is necessary for business in golden Bengal. The critical element is the contact. Money is no problem. The 12th grader had his lucky break when he came across the big

to the golden days of drug business. By the time Haroon was half way through to his third year after plenty of hard work and struggling every bit with this small scholarship money, his friend appeared one day with his newly acquired reconditioned car. It cost him half a million taka. Haroon no question of ever having that sort of money, had never seen so much money together at one place. So

firm proposal from his friend to give up studies and since he knows enough of distillation while money is no longer any problem; the plan was to manufacture country liquor which is currently enjoying a rapidly expanding market. Haroon felt increasingly convinced that life time of an engineers job would never provide him for the sort of income his friend was talking about.

So my dear human development experts, please tell me why any one in his right mind should adopt the futile path of human development through education? Plenty of brawn and brutal courage as well as conspicuous lack of education and morality are the keys to human development of ultimately living and eating well. Bangladesh has practically become the land of gold for those who can grab the opportunities of rent by creating terror or ransom for kidnapped victims. Among fast selling marketable items are drugs and alcohol, as I mentioned earlier.

The so-called black marketing of tickets of all sorts (for movies, trains or buses) is a fairly legitimate business since it can be carried out openly for all to see. The volume of smuggled goods and services is the ever lasting glory of our international trade. Lastly, I must

mention the seasonal business, for example, just before Eid holidays. The temporary cattle markets provided plenty of festive bonus for the great masters of the land. Given the above background, definition of human development must undergo a revolutionary change.

Political agrandement calls for human development of a particular kind where education unfortunately would enjoy a diminishing rate of return. To be a politician, the carrier must begin as the slogan leader and a group of dedicated followers whose size must keep on growing. As a budding politician, anyone who had served buses, organized street fights, blast bombs and such other notorious attributes are not only essential but should be pursued vigorously. Please note that this is democratic politics of the grassroots, since streeturchins of today have the possibility of ending up as politicians of tomorrow.

However, if this is the state of affairs, what has happened to human development in spite of all the fat reports on the subject? Nothing, since the net effect of all efforts tend to be zero. Unless the leadership at the top realize that there ought to be a moral code of behaviour; unless business deals and political activities are conducted under certain recognized ethical standards, devastation on the human front cannot be prevented. Practically, the danger signal number ten is about to be hoisted.



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

Mastan brother of the neighbourhood. He was introduced to the Barabhai (no name known and they go by the general title of Barabhai) and the deal was made. By the time Haroon started as a first year engineering student, his friend was well on his way to heroin business. It was a seller's paradise and supply was no problem since great Barabhai took care of not only supplies but protection from police as well as competing drug pushers.

Money seemed to be growing on trees which were again of high yielding variety? thanks

please appreciate the inhuman price Haroon is paying for his human development; or the question is where the hell is his development if without any such so-called human development effort, his friend can amass so much of money and wealth. Basically, there is no purpose left behind the struggle for a university degree.

In fact, with a degree you end up with a job which would give you salary just enough for barely meeting your basic needs; while rising middle class aspirations will remain unfulfilled. In fact, Haroon received a

Letter From America

"Downsizing", American Style!

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Like a person just diagnosed with cancer, a terminated employee's first question is: "Why me?" Followed by a feeling of hurt, anger, remorse, self-pity and finally resignation. "What could I have done differently?" he would continually ask himself. Nothing, really. Unless there is a performance or personality problem, it is usually the luck of the draw.

companies let the computer do the cutting. If the computer spits out your number, your time is up!

Ever resourceful, Americans have come up with ingenious ways of delivering bad news. It all has to do with semantics. Harsh words such as "fired" or "terminated" are seldom used to describe job loss. Instead, an employee is "involuntarily separated." These days an unfortunate employee is likely to be "surplus-ed," or much more in vogue, "downsized."

Fortunately, there is no stigma attached to losing one's job whatsoever in America. Job-severed employees, nevertheless, do feel that they have been stripped of their manhood or womanhood temporarily. Whereas it is not unthinkable for a person in similar predicament in Bangladesh to contemplate suicide, Americans take job loss in their stride. They freely talk about being downsized or being "in-between jobs." The latter is significant, because almost everyone who seeks another job after losing one, usually gets it. Besides, even while unemployed and

receiving unemployment benefits, Americans enjoy the safety net of an extended family. Because they do not have roots in the country, job loss is far more traumatic financially for the recently arrived immigrants.

American employees are very well informed about the profitability of their company. They monitor the stock on the Internet, take note of the quarterly earnings reports and the stock's reaction to it. Therefore, the company's response to poor earnings — a decision to decrease "human resources" — do not come as a surprise to them. Some jump ship well before they are pushed overboard. Those who stay, have to endure the agony of "staff reduction."

A company the writer knows, went through downsizing recently. The grapevine was so reliable that the employees knew the exact dates when some of them would be let go. Firing was spread out over three days. An unsuspecting employee would receive a call from the head of a different de-

partment. The employee would believe that he/she is probably being transferred to the new department. As soon as the employee would enter the manager's room, the manager would close the door and deliver the bad news.

Abrasive or hostile words are never spoken in these meetings. Instead, profuse praise is heaped on the canned employee: "You are a superstar. You have made enormous contribution to the success of the company. Unfortunately, we have fallen on lean times. We have to let some of our best and brightest go!" One or two security personnel would accompany the now ex-employee to his office, give him time to pack his personal belongings into boxes, help him load the boxes into his car, and escort him out of the premises. The employee would be allowed to say good bye to his colleagues under the watchful eye of the manager.

Although it may seem brutal, there are reasons why companies behave this way. There have been instances when a terminated employee, unsupervised, cut telephone lines and

did enormous damage to the facility before leaving. More alarmingly, sometimes, even normal cool employees, told of their terminal fate, lose their cool and become violent to the point of murdering their bosses! It is not easy for the managers either. To sit across the table from a fellow employee who may be your friend, and whom you may have known for years, and tell him/her what the company's employment decision in his/her case is, can be gut-wrenching. All managers would admit to this being the hardest thing they had ever done.

A Chinese-American employee who had endured the excesses of the cultural revolution compared the capitalist torture to the communist torture. During the cultural revolution of the 1960s, he recalled how everyone had to meet in a public place every week and criticize himself/herself for hours. The self-criticism would be along the lines of entertaining bourgeois thoughts even momentarily, and deviating from Chair-

man Mao's teachings. It was tough to criticize oneself for new violations each week, where there was none. Of course, all the confessions were fake, he recalled.

There was nothing fake about the capitalist. Up until the cuts were completed, for three days employees agonized whether they were one of the lucky, or unlucky ones. They would avoid answering the phone, pace up and down the corridor ashen-faced, and be totally non-communicative. Grown men and women were reduced to juvenile nervous wrecks. Feelings of hurt and anger would linger for days after. Employees who had served the company for 35 years were suddenly turned into non-persons. One such long-serving female employee protested: "I am leaving, but why are you treating me like a criminal? What have I done to you?" Surely, there must be better ways.

Like a person just diagnosed with cancer, a terminated employee's first question is: "Why me?" Followed by a feeling of hurt, anger, remorse, self-pity and finally resignation. "What could I have done differently?" he would continually ask himself. Nothing, really. Unless there is a performance or personality problem, it is usually the luck of the draw. Former colleagues and friends would rally to the downsized's support. "Things usually work out for the best," they would console him or her. Things usually do.

Unhappy Turn in Sino-US Relations

by A S M Nurunnabi

Will China open its market to American businesses in order to get a seat in the World Trade Organization? Is it snapping up US technology, against US regulations, for its military, and selling missile technology to Iran and Pakistan? What is it doing to make the world safe from North Korea?

US President Bill Clinton is the sixth President, since Nixon who opened the way in 1972, to practise "constructive engagement" with China. Beginning a nine-day trip to China, President Clinton was accorded an extraordinary welcome at the ancient Chinese capital of Xian on June 25 last year. Clinton's visit was then considered a historic one and it was hoped that it would bring stability to the region. The general perception at that time was that in a subtle re-arrangement of its Asian relationship, the US was putting China atop the list ahead of its traditional allies. In the opinion of astute observers, it was then felt that it was in the interest of US to use all its out to make tomorrow's China less of a worry than today's.

That diplomatic scenario has since appeared to have changed. In the opinion of analysts, "One day we're friends with Beijing, the next day we're enemies." This is, in their opinion, no way for a superpower to run a foreign policy. Washington's relations with Beijing are beginning to resemble a roller-coaster ride — complete with aftershocks of confusion and

nausea. What has caused the recent deterioration in the Sino-US relationship? First among the causative factors has been Washington's decision to finance research on a Theatre Missile Defence System, the new avatar of Ronald Reagan's Star Wars defence shield which include Taiwan within its protective bubble. As far as anyone knows, there's only one country that might wish to lob ballistic missiles at Taiwan, and that's China which considers the island a renegade state, its property, and not a suitable tenant inside a high-tech American defence umbrella.

China lately said that it had talks with Russia on Washington's plan for a Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) to protect US troops and allies in Asia and that both Beijing and Moscow were opposed to the programme. The Chinese have vehemently opposed suggestions that Taiwan, which

Beijing regards as a rebel province, should be included under the umbrella. Beijing said this would mean a US military presence on the island and this would be "the last straw" in difficult bilateral ties.

Russia is worried the US plan to build a limited missile shield would mean revising the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, which Moscow regards as a cornerstone of nuclear stability.

Japan, struggling to ally Chinese fears over its closer strategic ties with Washington, said that the envisaged US-Japan missile defence system would not pose any threat to other countries. Japan decided late last year — after North Korea launched a missile over Japan last August — to study the defence system proposed by the US to help shield the region from incoming missiles. The Japanese Foreign Minister said, "As we have repeatedly

said, the TMD system which we are considering is purely a system of self-defence and will never pose any military threat to other countries or spark an arms race in the region."

There are some other contentious chestnuts in the unhappy relationship between the two countries: will China open its market to American businesses in order to get a seat in the World Trade Organization? Is it snapping up US technology, for its military, and selling missile technology to Iran and Pakistan? What is it doing to make the world safe from North Korea?

When Zhu, the Chinese Prime Minister, flies to Washington next month, it will be the first US visit by a Chinese premier in 15 years. And Zhu is a most powerful Number Two, the former economic czar, attempting a vast overhaul of the

Chinese economy, which he defended again lately in a remarkably populist speech, broadcast live, before the National People's Congress in Beijing. Zhu wants some big achievements for his trip, most notably a breakthrough on the WTO fracas.

China and the US seem to be engaged in a painfully clumsy dance with a pair of discordant orchestras and plenty of jeering spectators, particularly on a Capital Hill outraged by Chinese suppression of political parties and individual rights. The intriguing question is whether the two partners will manage to get a step or two right to settle the WTO dispute, for example, which could give a boost to Asia's regional economy, or to deepen cooperation on reeling in North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes.

The alleged spy scandal is another big thorn in the sides of the two big powers. Bill Clinton has already been bruised by accusations that illegal Chinese contributions found their way into his 1996 campaign and that he was too eager to allow US firms to sell high-tech computers and satellite technology to Beijing. Now the "soft on China" shouts are louder than ever, amidst claims from critics in both parties that top administration officials delayed and soft-pedalled the investigation into alleged Chinese spying at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico.

The FBI's prime suspect is Taiwanese-born American scientist Wen Ho Lee, 59, who first began working in Los Alamos in the 1970s. A well-placed government source said that Lee travelled to a 1988 seminar in Hong Kong and, with Chinese officials present, allegedly divulged sensitive information on the miniaturisation in the design of America's most modern warhead the W-88. In 1995 the CIA obtained a secret Chinese government document that discussed details of the W-88. The document was dated 1988 — the year the warhead went into production and a year in which Lee also visited Beijing. When intelligence analysts studied the data from nine Chinese nu-

clear tests from 1990 to 1995, they were chagrined to discover that the blasts involved miniaturised warhead that was a near replica of the W-88. According to sources, they also concluded that China had acquired details of no fewer than five other US warheads.

Still, according to a US official, it was not until mid-1996 that investigators singled Lee out as a suspect. But Lee was not fired, because the FBI and the Department of Energy which runs Los Alamos, were still trying to build their case. On March 6, the New York Times broke an extensive story and the FBI swept in. Lee finally lost his job for allegedly breaking security rules. So far, no criminal charges have been brought against him for his suspected offence.

When the scandal broke, Clinton, Vice President Al Gore and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright all warned publicly that this episode must not interfere with constructive relations with China. They were so fast and voluble in denouncing their China policy that they sidestepped close to confirming the critics' accusation that they are more interested in a "strategic partnership" with Beijing than in facing up to their espionage problem. It was pointed out by security sources that it was not the first case of Chinese snooping at US weapons labs. During the 1970s and again in the 90s, Taiwanese-born American scientists delivered to China the secrets of, first, neutron bomb and then laser technology.

Some international observers opine, the shocker is not that China spies but that the US took such a leisurely approach to countering China's successes. Some White House sources blame the scandal on the culture of scientific sharing. "Scientists think differently than people in the national security business," said an administration official.

Some analysts said that more important than 'who-dunit' is the question of how badly the leak damages American security. Some experts say China would eventually have miniaturised its nuclear weapons on its own, but now Beijing has apparently taken a shortcut to the most modern technology. Smaller warheads mean Chinese missiles will be lighter, more mobile, easier to hide and able to hit multiple longer-range targets.

To the Editor...

Help the Kosovars

Sir, We have all seen the stark images of refugees in KOSOVO suffering from the horrors of "ethnic cleansing" and life in concentrated camps of refugees. Imagine if each of us could do something as easy as to donate old clothes, toys, or other items to assist these refugees.

Student Humanitarian Aid Project Emisaries (SHAPE) is an organization of students who have chosen to translate idealism into action. SHAPE's goal is to provide items donated by young people across the globe to the refugees of Kosovo who have been displaced from their homes and most of their worldly possessions. SHAPE seeks to uniquely tap the idealism and energy of students by setting forth an effort that enables young people do more than dream dreams about a better world; it allows the future to help SHAPE the future!

Through such small actions, we can together indeed help change the world.

We can be shocked by atrocities; we can offer our prayers to the victims; yet unless our empathy is accompanied by action, change will never take place. Small actions can make a world of difference. As Senator Robert F. Kennedy once spoke of tiny ripples of hope leading to waves of actions, so to can each of us make small efforts to SHAPE the world and help the anguishing refugees of Kosovo.

Brett Bruen Student Humanitarian Aid Project Emisaries (SHAPE) 306 Ross Cole - 625 Elm Drive - Madison, WI 53706-1126, USA

Send ground troops and give independence

Sir, The condition of the Kosovars is known to all now. According to my opinion they have no way except independence. They cannot run anymore with the brutal Serbian leadership. NATO, UN and all

other nations should support on sending ground troops immediately. Bangladesh should take an active role on this issue.

Kausar Dhaka

Daring dacoities

Sir, Everyday the newspapers are full of reports about daring dacoity cases in the cities. Gangs of armed persons openly enter residential houses or flats during day time, tie up the inmates, rob them and shoot those who obstruct. The shopping complexes are also being raided without any fear of being caught or prosecuted. There are too many guns around with too many gangs.

The situation prevailing in the society appears to be outside the control of the police. The police chiefs have openly admitted that they are short of personnel and modern equipment to control the situation. The effect of political police work is quite visible! Why the police cannot be as swift and as

efficient with the non-political criminals? This gap has to be explained to the public.

The police need the support of the government, administration and the elected regime in power (the political will). If all the three layers fail, or are found wanting, evil will prevail and governance will suffer.

The employment of security guards by the victims has no effect, as the guards are weaker than the police in efficiency, mobilisation, training, experience and logistic support.

Now, every household is in danger, even during the daylight and office hours. There is no guaranteed security 24 hours of the day and night, inside and outside homes and offices. Where is the safe haven? Where to hide and feel secure?

The Prime Minister is aware of the situation. We insecure citizens hope she will take some drastic measures to contain the lawlessness prevailing in different tiers of the society today.

Abul Ahmad Dhaka