

NEW YEAR SPECIAL

FOCUS

Looking Back and Looking Ahead A Few Thoughts for the New Year

DESPITE all the hoopla last year surrounding the potential Y2K glitch, the real new millennium hasn't started until today. As the much feared Y2K date fiasco had caused no obvious or severe disruptions in electric power, communication, banking or other computerised services that define modern life, nothing similar is expected to happen this time around. So now it's the perfect moment for some soul searching. For the lesson on this real millennial morning, we can look back at the last millennium.

In the past thousand years, we have travelled across the planet, exploring our world, the reality around us and the depths of our own souls. Unfortunately, we are not always quick to understand what we have found. Make no mistake, humanity has done great things and come a long way. We have filled the world and explored every corner of its surface. Built great cities and then great nations. Gone from trading pottery with our neighbours to trading online on the computers. We have explored the earth and then started reaching out to the planets beyond.

Obviously foremost among our achievements was the development of the scientific methods as a way of exploring the world around us. We have gone from fearing eclipses to studying them; from working out myths built on the patterns of stars to working out the molecular structure of those stars.

We learned to communicate instantly; to send images through cables so we can now view a sunset thousands of miles away. We built vehicles that move faster than sound and ships that sail under the waves. We even learned to fly and to walk on the moon and take pictures of Mars. We came so far technologically that we have stood on the brink of annihilating ourselves simply by pushing a few buttons. We became physicians and learned to heal ourselves, too. Many deadly diseases have been brought under control. We now transplant organs that 1000 years ago many didn't even know existed. Unfortunately, disease is a tough customer, and just as we eliminate one plague, other, stronger strains rise up to bite us. We became politicians and explored different ways of governing ourselves, although we keep coming back to the old idea that there's nothing like self-determination. Great empires came and went; democracy, once perjured as mob rule, seems to have become the standard for a civilised society.

In this century alone, we experimented with Nazism and fascism and found through bitter experience and brutal loss what false gods they were.

by Dr. A. R. Chowdhury
Maybe we can start by taking the best from our past and making sure it's preserved in the face of the new technologies that threaten to overwhelm our future. Maybe we should see if change can be slowed a little so that we can understand its ramifications or, if not, maybe we can make sure that we at least think about such things rather than turn a blind eye to what might happen.

We explored religion, too. And, although at times, religion was undoubtedly science's nemesis, it also at other times was learning's partner. Where would mathematics be without Muslim scholars?

So, have we made progress? You bet we have.

In fact, in this century that saw us progress more rapidly technologically than perhaps all previous centuries combined, we also slaughtered more humans than previous butchers had ever dreamed possible.

For evidence, we don't need to go too far. During our own liberation war in 1971, people were lined up and made to run over open ground into waves of machine gun fire. Others were forced to stand at the edge of mass open graves as they listened to the gun bolts sliding back behind them. Entire villages were set ablaze as if they were medieval torches. Thousands were allowed to starve to death while thousands more were marched into something the 20th century can surely call its own: the human death factory.

Too many of us still too often

exhibit a callous disregard for life. Maybe part of it is because our individual lives are short, and that despite all our technological trappings, we aren't so different from our forebears. We find our joys and sorrows in the moments of our daily lives, just as they did. And we don't always learn what we should, just as they didn't.

The problem as we move into the new millennium, however, is that our certain order will become more precarious than ever and that the day after tomorrow may be far different from the day before yesterday. So this is as good a time as any to take a look forward.

One hundred years ago, many people living at the end of another century believed themselves at the pinnacle of civilisation. They believed more progress had been made in their century than in the previous nineteen hundred years combined. And they were right. Some even had the good sense to worry that those developments could lead to devastating consequences in the coming century. They were right, too.

How much farther have we come since then? And what new

dangers lie ahead? Changes have been fast and furious. And be sure of one thing: the pace of change will continue to accelerate. We will have rapidly expanding amounts of information at our fingertips while continuing to have trouble figuring out what to do with it. And that's hardly the end of our rapidly developing confusion. Genetic research could in time and not a very long time create human clones, eliminate disease and give us engineered humans. It's all part of humanity's never-ending story of exploration, which will continue in other ways, too. We will undoubtedly plumb the ocean depths and move into the solar system, discovering more than we now can possibly imagine.

But the big question is: what kind of ethical or belief system will we develop to deal with such issues? How do we balance the ideal of realising the potential of each human with the ideal of building communities that serve the greater good of humanity, especially since both ideals are needed to adequately explore and understand the reality around us?

Maybe we can start by taking the best from our past and making sure it's preserved in the face of the new technologies that threaten to overwhelm our future. Maybe we should see if change can be slowed a little so that we can understand its ramifications or, if not, maybe we can make sure that we at least think about such things rather than turn a blind eye to what might happen. Surely, there's no better time to start thinking than right now.

FIRST of January marks the beginning of the Christian New Calendar Year 2001. There are other calendar years older than the Christian year, namely, the Buddhist year. Our own Islamic calendar year is younger than the Christian Year.

The prediction of a potential doomsday caused by Y2-K bug on 1st January, 2000 proved totally wrong. Furthermore, in average public minds, the year 2000 was the beginning of the new century but mathematical pedants may not agree with that assumption. They hold the view that 2001 is the beginning of the new millennium. Therefore, for many it is not only a New Year but also an entry into a new century.

The New Year is always a time out with the old and in with the new. During the New Year many make resolutions. Psychologists believe that the making of New Year resolutions is detrimental to one's health. According to them, not only does it encourage a person to focus on the negative elements of one's life and body but the resolutions induce feelings of low esteem and failure when one breaks them. As one inevitably does.

Many believe that thinking about the likely events in 2001 is like visiting a dentist. It is going to happen whether one likes it or not, so some say why does one waste time beforehand? Despite this, it is always exciting to foresee some of the events that are likely to occur in Bangladesh and in the world. One is tempted to forecast those as distinct from prediction.

For Bangladesh at least three

by Harun ur Rashid
It seems certain: for a country like Bangladesh to thrive in the age of information technology, its citizens must be flexible, skilled, creative, cosmopolitan and preferably conversant

in English... It is desirable that one may approach the New Year with optimism. Nothing is easy in this world. One hopes that the future will be marked with a strong underpinning of fairness and justice in all human activities.

events of public importance will occur during 2001.

First, the New Year ushers in an election year. Given the political temperature of major political parties in the country it would be an exhilarating year. Whenever it may be held the election will be a hotly contested one. With the election, comes the "big money" that will play a major role during the election campaign. In the US one Senate candidate in New Jersey spent about US\$57 million dollars to win the recent election. In Bangladesh the amount that will be spent will pale into insignificance compared to that spent in the US. But in the Bangladesh context it will be "big money".

Political campaigners, like military generals, always prepare for the campaign on the basis of the endlessly re-examined lessons of the previous one. The professionals will maintain that a winning campaign is all about better organisation, stricter discipline, and never being knocked off course by the media, events or opponents. Election campaign today is ruthless and controlling and the professionals believe that this is the only way to win an election. Female voters are likely to be targeted this time because their participation in the election is believed to be much higher in numbers than that of the males. The ultimate jury, of course, is the voter.

The only way to get election advertising across the country is to pay for the pamphlets and banners of a political party, image building of the candidate and "hire" the supporters. Many poor people earn more money during election campaign and they look forward to it. For many candidates, the political press is seen either as an enemy or a friend. Much of the campaign may be directed to woo the print media by a political party.

Second, the matter that is likely to attract the attention during 2001 appears to be the fate of the condemned prisoners who were found guilty in the gruesome murder of Bangabandhu. The case is yet to be heard by a Third Judge in the High Court and then by the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. Almost every one is under suspense about the final outcome.

Third, the Non-Aligned Summit will be held in Dhaka. This has been a great honour for Bangladesh. More than 100 heads of state/government are likely to participate the conference to re-define the directions

of the Movement for the 21st century. Dhaka will be the focus of the media of the world during the conference.

In world affairs, it is argued that there are more unknowns under US foreign policy of the Bush Presidency. There is a view that tensions may increase in the Middle East and in Asia-Pacific region. It is believed that both incoming Secretary of State, General Colin Powell (63) and National Security Adviser, Ms. Condoleezza Rice (46) are inclined to see things in black and white.

It is reported that General Powell (a Gulf War hero) warned Iraqi President that the new administration would work to "re-energise" sanctions against Baghdad and was prepared "to confront" the Iraqi leader. Dr. Rice sees China as a "potential threat" to stability in the Asia-Pacific region and in her view the new administration should never be afraid to face Beijing when "our interests collide". It is argued that Clinton administration's strategic engagement with China had confused and alienated Washington's regional allies (Japan is reportedly one of them).

Both Powell and Rice are in favour of the need for a missile defence shield and if it is pursued, Russia and a few European countries that are opposed to it may see deterioration of friendly relations in the Trans Atlantic alliance.

In South Asia, India is likely to gain much from Bush's foreign policy. India will be perceived as a counter-weight to China by the US. Therefore it is likely that US-India strategic relations will be much closer than before. India's growing strength will be galling to Pakistan and a regional arms race may begin. Arms race means to ask the taxpayers for more money to produce or procure more lethal weapons systems, ignoring the poverty alleviation programmes. This might put the South Asian region in a tense, fluid and unpredictable situation, already it remains volatile because of the Kashmir dispute.

In Africa, the cycle of violence may not abate in Congo, Sierra Leone and Angola. The initiative of peace keeping force by the UN may decline because of the paucity of UN funds. There is a view that under the new administration of the US, even humanitarian assistance may be rejected unless there appears to be a

"clear American interest" at stake. US intervention in such crisis could be rare.

In many situations the UN suffers from inaction because of its shortage of funds. It is to be seen whether the Congress under the Bush administration pays the outstanding debt to the UN. There is a view that the Bush administration may intervene without UN's approval if the situation is perceived to be of national interest to the US. Many in the new administration appear to be of the view that what is good for America is good for the rest of the world.

On the "bread and butter" issue, there will be an insistence to commence the global trade talks under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) by the developed countries. The talks will attract the protesters who perceive that WTO is a vehicle for corporate hegemony and under WTO rules trade is not fair. Reduction of the causes of global warming will increasingly be an issue for all nations and the non-governmental organisations will press for an agreed formula to implement the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

Globalisation invokes four "mantras": free trade, deregulation, privatisation and "modification" (meaning that even the genetic basis of life can be bought and sold). The economic benefits of globalisation have not reached all countries. Some argue that globalisation is a techno-trap and the supporters of it do not want mobility of labour but only capital around the world. The New Year may see more entrenched position for and against globalisation. However economically, service industries untroubled by information technology and telecommunications will continue to dominate the world.

There will be emphasis on the protection of human rights. Promotion of dignity of a human being will continue to be the guiding principle for all nations, at least in public. Instability, violence and rebellion stem from the actions of those who ignore or scorn human rights. Strategies, such as opportunity, empowerment and security from poor people's vulnerability (sickness, crop failure, natural disasters etc) will be dished out as recipe to developing countries by the aid giving agencies.

It seems certain: for a country including Bangladesh to thrive in the age of information technology, its citizens must be flexible, skilled, creative, cosmopolitan and preferably conversant in English.

As the saying goes whatever will be will be in 2001 and therefore it is desirable that one may approach the New Year with optimism. Nothing is easy in this world. One hopes that the future will be marked with a strong underpinning of fairness and justice in all human activities.

The author, a barrister, is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

LET THERE BE LIGHT IN EVERYONE'S LIFE



Star photo by A.K.M Mohsin

Bangladesh : The Year in Retrospect

by Mansoor Mamoon
Standing at the threshold of 2001 Bangladeshis will naturally be thinking how the New Year will fare for the country. In all probability it will be a litmus test for the survival of democracy in Bangladesh. The year 2001 is the election year and much will depend on how fairly and peacefully the hustings are conducted.

domestic, sends red signal to the import-based fragile economy. In foreign relations, however, Bangladesh's spectacular gains are that for the second time it occupied its seat as a non-permanent member in the United Nations Security Council. President Clinton as the first US President undertook a brief visit to Dhaka and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid a return official visit. To the jubilation of the cricket-loving masses Bangladesh got its much-vaunted test playing status.

Virtually throughout the year the conflict between the Executive and the higher Judiciary centering the appeal on the death reference of Bangladesh's founding President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman murder case had been the talk of the country. The conflict persisted from the beginning of the year when judges felt embarrassed to hear the appeal to the end when the High Court division of the Supreme Court gave a split verdict. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's remark in course of an interview with BBC Bangla Service that criminals get shelter of the judiciary agitated the highest professional body of the lawyers who filed a contempt case against her and the High Court asked the PM to be cautious in passing such sweeping remarks against the judiciary. Judiciary also attracted public attention due to resignation of two High Court judges. For the first time in the annals of Bangladesh a judge had to tender his resignation centering a tape scandal in which he alleged to have telephonic conversation with former President and Jatiya Party Chief H M Ershad over the issue of bail in a corruption case. The other judge (Justice Kazi Shafi Uddin Ahmed) resigned in protest against superseding him and elevating his juniors to the Appellate Division blaming the incidence as an example of politicisation of the judiciary. The Judiciary also came into conflict with the country's print media in contempt cases were filed against several national dailies for what has been termed as 'contemptuous reporting'. Concerns were

voiced from both home and abroad against the trend of putting newsmen on the dock for what they did in course of discharging their professional duties honestly. Feuds between the Chief Election Commissioner and three Election Commissioners came out in the open over apparently the flimsy issue of appointment of a foreign computer consultant. With the general elections projected in less than a year's time this in-house quarrel in the EC came as a disturbing piece of news to many.

The stand-off between the ruling Awami League and the four-party combined opposition led by the BNP still persists and there is no sign of its immediate resolution. Opposition's boycott of parliament also continued throughout the year as in the past. For retaining their membership the opposition lawmakers, however by way of formality, joined the parliament session for a brief period. BNP lawmaker Major (Retired) Akhtaruzzaman's one-man revolt against the party decision of boycotting Parliament made the party jittery. BNP is also apparently in the throes of an identity crisis and certain remarks by some members of its think-tank raised controversies and greatly embarrassed the high command. Ershad's conviction and confinement in jail in a graft case appears to have marginalised the Jatiya Party making it leaderless. The Jamaat-e-Islami is also walking on a tight rope after the formal retirement of its Amir Professor Gholam Azam. Print media's highlighting of the excerpts of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission's Report on the atrocities perpetrated by the marauding Pakistani occupation forces during Bangladesh's War of Liberation renewed the demand for the trial of the war criminals. The overall law and order situation has further deteriorated and there have been widespread allegations of misuse of the Public Safety Act that it is being applied more against the opposition activists than against the ruling party cadres and goons who in their free-wheeling manner are creating anarchy and

vandalism. For the first time the World Bank presented a report on the rampant corruption in Bangladesh for the Paris meeting of the Development Partners in April 2000. The World Economic Forum and the Transparency International, Bangladesh also pointed accusing fingers at the draining out huge amount of funds from the state exchequer through corrupt means. The London-based Amnesty International published a sensational report on police brutalities in Bangladesh and the apathy and indifference of the successive governments towards this gross violation of human rights by the members of the law enforcing agencies. There were at least two major incidents of blaze in garments factories in which scores were killed in stampede. The initial public outcry against such recurring tragedies and the apathy and negligence of the authorities have however died down. So also the motor launch disasters in which last year over two hundred passengers perished.

The unprecedented flash floods in the southwestern part of the country due to onrush of waters from the adjoining areas in the Indian state of West Bengal caused havoc. The loss is yet to be ascertained. Low forex reserves caused grave concern to the economy and despite some corrective measures by the apex bank the situation cannot be said to have become satisfactory. Excepting the agriculture sector, the performance of other sectors failed to meet the targets set before them. Flow of foreign direct investment has literally nosedived. In the arena of education mass copying in the public examinations caused widespread consternation among the Low forex reserves. Before the dust of it could settle down came the textbook scandal. About twenty-five million school children are apprehended to be deprived of timely delivery of their textbooks. In Bangladesh the government delivers textbooks to primary and secondary level students. Increasing number of women have become vociferous about their demand for thirty-three per cent representation in

Parliament through direct election instead of thirty reserved seats the time limit of which will expire in 2001. Three years after the signing of the Peace Accord with the insurgents in the Chittagong Hill Tracts their leader Shantu Laskar has publicly blamed the government for what he termed as breach of trust and the terms of the accord and threatened that he along with his followers might think of returning to their old days (of insurgency) if this continues unaltered. The government, however, forcefully claimed that there had been no breach of trust and terms of the accord and that the accord is being fully and honestly implemented.

In the matters of foreign relations Bangladesh made some remarkable gains. The President of the world's lone superpower Bill Clinton visited Bangladesh in March. It was the first visit by a US President. Subsequently, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid a return visit to Washington and had a summit meeting with Clinton. US investment in Bangladesh's natural gas sector has substantially increased (from 20 million to eight billion dollars) the debate on the export of gas to India was the center of the attention among which Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Mori's trip to Dhaka deserves mention. Japan is the largest donor for Bangladesh and Mori was incidentally the second Japanese Prime Minister to visit Bangladesh after a gap of sixteen years. But Bangladesh's relations with Pakistan took a sudden u-turn and it all started with Pakistan's Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf's abrupt volte face in

meeting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina he apparently irritated by her condemnation of military rules and the General's unsolicited advice to Bangladesh to bury its past. Highly derogatory and inflammatory remark by a senior Pakistani diplomat based in Dhaka (Deputy High Commissioner Irfan Raja) against Bangladesh's War of Liberation brought forth indignation among all strata of the society. The concerned diplomat was subsequently declared a persona non grata, first such drastic action on the part of Bangladesh, and was expelled from the country. Bangladesh's bitterness over its huge trade imbalance with India (over one billion dollar in favour of India) persisted and there had also been some border skirmishes between the two countries' security forces.

Bangladesh had a new Chief of Army Staff inducted at the age end of the year. In the sporting arena Bangladesh has reasons for jubilation. It got the test status in cricket and made its debut as a test playing nation with an inaugural match with India. Standing at the threshold of 2001 Bangladeshis will naturally be thinking how the New Year will fare for the country. In all probability it will be a litmus test for the survival of democracy in Bangladesh. The year 2001 is the election year and much will depend on how fairly and peacefully the hustings are conducted. Foreign and local observers as well as development partners are already apprehensive of the outcome.

"All sorts of things and weather Must be taken in together, To make up a year And a sphere."

--Emerson

BANGLADESH'S stepping into the year 2000 had brought forth in its wake new expectations and new promises. The signs of how far the country has moved or is moving forward towards their fulfillment are yet to be discernible. If the major events of the year are dispassionately analysed it would appear that outcomewise it was just like another year, a year of mixed achievements. In many cases inspite of resolutions the prob-

lems confronting the country have rather aggravated and newer issues cropped up with snowballing effect. The long-running political stand-off between the ruling Awami League and the combined opposition led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) persisted. Amidst continuing boycott of the opposition Parliament largely remained non-functional. Law and order situation deteriorated and reached the nadir despite the enforcement of the controversial Public Safety Act (PSA), an unprecedented flash flood badly battered the southwestern part of the country and forex reserve reached an all time low while dwindling investment, both foreign and

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Dr. Rubaiul Murshed
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Tips of the year
Keeping calm throughout the year

Stress is simply a part of modern living. Whether we care or not depends on our own reaction to the stress. During our everyday problem/dangers we are outfitted with the fight or flight response. This charges the body for immediate action and the body produces more adrenaline, which speeds up the heart and the nervous system and increases the blood pressure. It also releases glucose into the blood to provide the extra energy needed for urgent action. Stress is nothing but just the effect of this response. It can be triggered by anything we are worried about at work or in our private lives.

There are as many symptoms of stress as there are causes for it. Loss of appetite, compulsive eating, indigestion, irritability, rushing from one task to another without completing the first are just few examples.

Almost anything can cause stress too much work, too little work, unemployment, having a demanding job, divorce, even being stuck in a traffic jam! The best way to reduce any stress caused by change is to try and adapt to the situation rather than fight against it.

A simple formula may summarize the situation
 S=M (D-C) where S stands for stress, M for motivation, large gap between demand (D) and coping (C) in presence of high motivation to do the work is very stressful.

Tips for keeping calm
 *Treat yourself to half an hour of total peace and quiet each day.
 *Take the phone off the hook; soak in a hot bath or simply curl up with a good book.
 *If you feel yourself getting wound up, step outside and go for a brisk ten-minute walk.
 *Live in the present don't worry too much about the past, it has already been and gone.
Tomorrow: Around the world and other tips.