

Pahela Baishakh message

Culture can be our best face forward

THE advent of a new Bangla year doesn't merely denote the passage of time, but something more than that. Pahela Baishakh has both a magical and auspicious ring to it for the very extraordinary reason that the day brings before the mind's eye our treasure-trove of a rich cultural heritage. We should feel proud of our cultural moorings and continue to draw inspiration from this annual rite with them.

However, we are not in the best of mood as we greet the new Bangla year. It is with a growing trepidation that the nation is looking at the way the two major political parties are about to lock their horns. The premonition of an imminent bout of physical confrontation is hard to shake off. Yet, one can only hope for a break, a shoring up of the politics of negativity latching on the Pahela Baishakh ambience of festivity and celebration. Just as entrepreneurs look forward to a better deal, farmers to a good harvest and traders to brisk business in a new year so must the politicians find themselves in a positive frame of mind.

Pahela Baishakh lays emphasis on homogeneity, secular harmony and unity in society. Threat to such values increases as obscurantism doesn't even stop short of maligning all that stands for Bangladeshi culture. The day is also the harbinger of the new marking the sweeping away of the old, stale and worn out. Its another powerful message that politicians and non-politicians alike must pay heed to.

Our rich arts and culture are not only entertaining but also a stimulus for creative faculties to blossom – based on greater love for the country. These can also help propel rapid national development and enhance country's image abroad. Of course, we should aim at industrial growth and agricultural breakthrough, but we have untapped potential in the area of arts and culture waiting to be realised as an image-builder. If we want to make our place in the world, culture is the route for it.

We have rich traditions in music, dance, dramas and plays. Though our folk culture is radiant with unique diversity and variety of forms and wealth of human emotions, it is a low priority promotional agenda as far as we can see. We are yet to have a modern theatre stage, although this branch of performing art has advanced a lot here. We have Chhayanaut, Bulbul Academy and Nazrul Academy. Whenever they organise functions and competitions, flashes of new promise are seen on stage. But what is being really done to groom them up as accomplished artistes is anybody's guess. There is a glaring lack of sustained efforts beyond tokenism, largely because of poor resource allocation rooted in low prioritisation of culture. This gap needs filling.

Shuvo Nababarsha!

Reducing cost of business

Eliminating corruption and inefficiency the key

A consensus finally seems to be forming among the business community and policy-makers and shapers in the country with respect to what needs to be done to make Bangladesh more competitive in the global market. We have finally come to the belated realisation that corruption and inefficiency greatly increase the cost of doing business in Bangladesh, and that this artificially boosted cost of doing business is the main hurdle that the private sector faces. What is now needed is action on the part of the government to turn this realisation into the basis for policies that will help remove or at least alleviate these barriers to doing business.

The existing regulatory and administrative environment is rife with corruption and inefficiency. For instance, goods arriving at Chittagong port must go through a mind-boggling 42 levels of customs clearance before release. Cutting this down to a more internationally accepted 12 levels would both increase efficiency and limit the opportunity for corruption. Similarly, the unloading time at the port currently stands at a minimum of six days compared with ten hours for India and six hours for Singapore. We must recognise that we are competing in a global market these days and that it is imperative to keep up with international standards.

Nor are corruption and inefficiency the only obstacles to doing business in Bangladesh. Law lax enforcement, a compromised legal system, and out-of-date infrastructure are only a few of the other challenges that the business community faces. Indeed, perhaps the most crucial issue for the business community right now is their security and safety, given the level of threat, extortion, and even murder, that the community must live in fear of.

The bottom line is that the government must focus on the needs of the business community for the sake of the entire economy. The artificial costs of doing business in Bangladesh harm us all by slowing the pace of economic development. There are many measures such as the appointment of a tax ombudsman at the ports and the simplification of customs procedures that could have an immediate positive impact that the government can take. The government must pay close attention to this matter and do everything in its power to lower the cost of doing business in the country to an acceptable level.

SHAMSUZZAMAN KHAN

AS an old saying goes: "Bangalees have thirteen festivals in twelve months." This experience-based adage gives an impression of a society which was affluent, cohesive and joyful. It further reveals that the olden society of Bengal had been featured by an intense cultural atmosphere and resulting social euphoria.

The saying actually holds true about Hindu Bengalees. Muslim life in Bengal had differed substantially from that of their Hindu neighbours. Bengali Muslims, had, in fact, no ethnic, indigenous or locally originated (except for a few legend, or cult-based quasi-religious events) national, regional or group-centred secular cultural festivals. All their broad-based, community-oriented and family-centred festivals were religious or semi-religious in nature. But the interaction between the geographical setting and the socio-cultural milieu of their habitat and religious beliefs produced an eclectic mindset. This is how a very significant metamorphosis occurs in Bengali Muslim mind over the years. In this process, they slowly but surely accept pluralistic worldview, western liberal democratic values, and finally, Bengali nationalism.

A reputed social scientist had rightly termed this metamorphosis as, "Bengali Muslims' homecoming." The language movement of 1952, had in fact, played a decisive role in shaping and sharpening the Bengali identity of the younger generations of Bengali Muslims.

This is new generation of Bengali nationalist Muslims were searching for some lively and solid component of their newly found secular nationalism. Bengali era and the age-old tradition of *Pahela Baishakh* (first day of Bengali almanac's first month) celebrations in rural Bengal provided them with a strong basis

for their new pursuit.

Bangabda or Bengali era is essentially a hybrid era. Which is why it is a common heritage of almost all sections of people of Bengal. Renowned scientist and Indian almanac reformer Dr Meghnad Saha has written: "After the introduction of Tarik-i-Ilahi (1556 AD) in the year of his accession to the throne by Emperor Akbar, the people of Bengal began to use the Surya Sidhanta reckoning and the solar year. The Bengali San, we take Hijri year, elapsed in 1556 i.e. 963 and add to it the number of solar years." If we follow this rule the reckoning of the Bengali new year today would be 963+2004 AD-1556=1411 Bengali San.

agrarian country. Agrarian milieu produces many rituals and indigenous practices. Rituals – even the primordial ones, are abundantly found in rural Bengal. Some of the surviving rituals and local events had nicely been integrated with the later modern construction, namely the present-day *Bangla navabarsa utsab* (Bengali new year's festival). These primordial agricultural-related rituals include 'Amani' and many other minor local practices. 'Amani' is a domestic ritual performed on the first day of the Bengali new year's morn by individual agricultural families for the well-being of the family members and good harvest

fight respectively.

Some of these regional events are now extinct or on the verge of extinction.

Let us now look at the bigger Baishaki festive occasions. These are *Punyaha*, *halkhata* and *mela*. *Punyaha* denotes 'a sacred day'. The *zamindars* of Bengal observed this day during the month of Baishakh to collect land tax from their subjects. There were much pomp and grandeur at the *zamindar's* palace or *kachari* (office). On this occasion *zamindars* gave audience to their subjects, exchanged greetings and entertained them with sweets, betel nuts etc. Once an universal *Baishaki* festival, *Punyaha* is now extinct with the

for the whole family. So purchasing daily necessities on credit was inevitable. That is why the *Halkhata* was so important. *Halkhata* is a suitable occasion for the consumers to clear their debts. It gives them pleasure, satisfaction and some sort of pride in the society. Business houses entertain their customers and patrons with sweets. They also decorate their shops with festoons and flowers.

After the independence of Bangladesh, our economy has grown more or less on a capitalist path and a large number of cash money-holding consumers have emerged. This situation reduces the importance of *Halkhata*.

From earliest times, the *Mela*

the contrary, the autocratic regime imposed ban on Rabindra Sangeet (Tagore song) in 1967. This culturally repressive role of the then central Pakistani government infuriated the Bengalees. And it added a political dimension to cultural emancipation. During this year (1967) Chhayanaut, a leading cultural organisation of the country, organised the *Pahela Baishakh* celebration at Ramna garden. It was a neat function attended by a modest-size audience. But this function was to enkindle a new spirit among the Bengalis. In fact, this initiative had sharpened the Bengali identity and added fuel to the growing Bengali nationalism.

After the emergence of Bangladesh, Chhayanaut's Bengali new year celebrations at Ramna *Batamul* have become phenomenal. These have been massive and ever increasing. It is in fact, a great historic festival and only national secular cultural festival of the country. It is interesting to note that Bengali new year day celebrations of olden time were rather small, localised and group-based folk events and observed only in idyllic rural surroundings. Now the tradition has changed. The present-day, urban revival of the new year's celebration is a case in point. The old rituals and local events have had a rebirth as a grand national festival. Its role of protests against religious fundamentalism and autocratic regimes is still very pronounced. The unique Nababarsha parade and its masks are a critique on social injustices and other ills of society. So, it has a perennial significance.

Shamsuzzaman Khan is a former DG of National Museum

It added a political dimension to cultural emancipation. During this year (1967) Chhayanaut, a leading cultural organisation of the country, organised the Pahela Baishakh celebration at Ramna garden. It was a neat function attended by a modest-size audience. But this function was to enkindle a new spirit among the Bengalis. In fact, this initiative had sharpened the Bengali identity and added fuel to the growing Bengali nationalism.

So, it is the considered opinion of Dr Saha that the Bengali San derived from Tarik-i-Ilahi (1556 AD) of Emperor Akbar. And, it is an amalgam of Lunar year Hijri and Indian solar year. Akbar's court astronomer Fatehullah Shirajee innovated this hybrid reckoning system. Bengali Nobel laureate Professor Amartya Sen's comment in this regard is interesting. He says, "When a Bengali Hindu does his religious ceremonies according to the local calendar, he may not be fully aware that the dates invoked in his Hindu practice is attuned to a commemorating Mohammad's flight from Mecca to Madina, albeit in a mixed lunar – solar representation (An Assessment of the Millennium – address, 20th August 1998 – New Delhi). So, Bengali San is a manifestation of engaging cultural integration. In fact, the Bengali culture is a mixed culture and it encompasses the elements of many civilisations, races and religions.

Bangladesh is basically an

throughout the year.

Gamvira is also a local cultural event found mainly in Maldah and Chapainawabganj districts of India and Bangladesh respectively. It is composed of dramatic movements, and social problem-oriented dialogue between the two main performers and along with folk song and dance. Outwardly, a humorous folk art form *Gamvira* is an event of contemporary social criticism.

Another local event of Baishak is *bali khela*. It is a wrestlers' game. This *Baishakhi* festival-game was introduced by Abdul Jabbar, a champion Bali of Chittagong during the early years of last century. Jabbar's *bali khela* is still very popular and held every year at Lalidighi Maidan, Chittagong on 12 Baishak.

Another regional event of Baishak was cattle race. Munshiganj and Manikganj were famous for this colourful fiesta. Netrakona and Brahmanbaria were well-known for bull fight and cock

abolition of *zamindari* system.

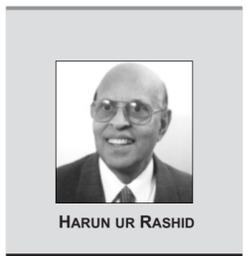
It now exists only in Chittagong hill tracts. Tribal kings observe this occasion with much festivity and fanfare.

'*Halkhata*' was also a nation-wide celebration of Pahela Baishak. Dr Muhammad Enamul Huq rightly observed that *Halkhata* is the opposite side of the coin, named *Punyaha*. Business communities of the country up to the level of village grocers' did arrange *Halkhata* event almost compulsorily. It was, in fact, a necessary requisite for business in Bangladesh. Our economy was totally agriculture-oriented. In this economy cash sale is almost impossible because 80 percent of population were village-dwellers and dependent on agriculture. For this reason they did not have channels of regular flow of cash money. They did grow jute and paddy and sell them to acquire cash money. With this seasonal cash money they bought their yearly clothes and other necessary items

(fair) was a main component of *Baishaki* observances. This component has thrived qualitatively. It is believed that nearly three hundred fifty *melas* are now organised in Bangladesh during the month of Baishak. *Baishaki Mela* organised by BSCIC in Dhaka is spatially massive and temporally lengthy.

Baishaki celebrations have played a politically significant and culturally decisive role in Bangladesh. During the semi-colonial Pakistani period, Bengalees faced a stiff resistance in organising the Bengali new year's day. In the face of this negative stance by the then central government, Bengali scholars and cultural activists put forward the argument that Bengali era was introduced by Emperor Akbar and that its Muslim connection was very strong. Pakistani rulers, particularly the military regime of Ayub Khan, did not pay any heed to these arguments. On

Why didn't Saddam Hussein come clean with WMD



HARUN UR RASHID

where they wanted to go and inspect what they wanted to see. In 1998, several times Iraq refused UN inspectors access to government sites and later to Presidential palaces. Iraq's continuing refusal in cooperating with UN arms inspectors led to a series of bombing attacks by the US under the Clinton administration.

Thereafter Iraq expelled US arms inspectors from Iraq. In 2000 it was reported that he made the following

Hussein thought that UN was run by the dictates of America and wanted to be defiant to the US. The role of Richard Butler, the former Australian UN chief arms inspector, did not help in this respect. Saddam Hussein doubted the impartiality and objectivity of UN inspectors. He might have believed that UN inspectors were nothing but spies of America to assess the situation for his overthrow or his assassination. Now as various sources have

was pretending to have weapons of mass destruction in order to enhance his prestige among other Arab nations. He garnered a great admiration from many Arabs believing that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction as against Israel (Israel has in possession weapons of mass destruction including nuclear bombs).

Third, his pretense could be ascribed to domestic politics. The weapons of mass destruction had

tion came to power in 2001, international environment was in his favour because UN sanctions had reportedly caused deaths of about one million Iraqi children from 1991 to 2000. The TV footage showing sick small children in hospitals without medicine and diagnostic equipment raised question of effectiveness of sanctions. Dennis Halliday, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq between 1997-98, resigned in disgust to see the

Conclusion

Saddam Hussein made a number of highly miscalculated foreign policy decisions. For example, he attacked Iran in 1980 thinking that Iran was weak after the 1979 Islamic revolution (Arab and Western nations including the US supported him against Iran). In 1990 he invaded Kuwait imagining that no country would come to assist Kuwait. Probably the same bent of mind was at work with him that American would not launch a war without UN approval.

For his colossal mistake, wrong judgment and unrelenting pride, Saddam Hussein is now a captive of the US-led Coalition Authority, reportedly moved to Qatar. His capture on 13 December by the US troops from a mud-hole, providing a sad image of the wild-eyed and unkempt former mighty dictator with disheveled hair and scraggy beard, is likely to remain the lasting memory of him in history. His situation is somewhat comparable to what Shelley wrote on King of Kings, *Ozymandias*:

"My name is Qzymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

No thing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Barister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladeshi Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

BOTTOM LINE

The weapons of mass destruction had been an important element of Saddam Hussein's political strategy and strength within Iraq. There is a speculation that he might have feared that if his internal adversaries realised that he no longer had the capability to use these destructive weapons they would try to revolt against him.

statement: " We will destroy all the weapons, if they destroy their weapons." From the statement, the US and British intelligence agencies reportedly came to a view that Iraq had something to hide with respect to weapons of mass destruction.

Possible reasons

The pertinent question is: if Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction, what was Saddam Hussein thinking? Many political and military analysts have searched for answers for his self-destructing behaviour. It seems that many factors – both internal and external – could be responsible and a few of them are described below:

First, some say that Saddam

disclosed, the US did run a covert action campaign against him, starting in 1991 and US intelligence did use UN operations without UN knowledge to gather intelligence for that campaign.

Second, his sense of false pride probably prompted him not to allow UN inspectors to visit his palaces. Hans Blix, the last Swedish UN chief arms inspector, came to the same view. Saddam Hussein wanted to be seen by Arabs as a strong political leader and Iraq to be perceived as regional power. The statements to US interrogators of former Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq, Tariq Aziz and other senior officials, captured after last year's war, revealed that Saddam Hussein

been an important element of Saddam Hussein's political strategy and strength within Iraq. He used them against the Kurds in Halabja in 1988 and in 1991 during the Shi'ite revolt that broke out after the Gulf War (incidentally the Western powers including the US kept mute on the use of chemical weapons). There is a speculation that he might have feared that if his internal adversaries realised that he no longer had the capability to use these destructive weapons they would try to revolt against him. Thus open admission that he had no weapons of mass destruction could have jeopardised his political position in Iraq.

Fourth, until the Bush administra-

adverse effects of sanctions in Iraq. Saddam Hussein hoped that in the not too distant future, sanctions would be lifted and he did not need to come clean with weapons of mass destruction.

Finally, Iraq was in a mess after the 1991 war and governmental machinery was believed to have not worked efficiently. Some say that there is a possibility that Saddam Hussein's authority was crumbling within his own government. Some Iraqi scientists told US interrogators they avoided or dragged their feet to manufacture weapons of mass destruction. There is a possibility that Saddam Hussein was probably not aware of this fact.

The Botomul from afar

AZIZ MALLICK writes from London

IT will be the first time that I will be spending the Nobo Borsho away from the colour and bustle of the botomul. I feel almost jealous of all the people who will wake up at the crack of dawn and take part in something that is so central to our culture.

Ironically, I remember how much coaxing it took to wake me up the first time I went. But since that time, more than 10 years ago, I hadn't missed it once.

Funnily enough, on the way to Ramna, it didn't feel like we were celebrating our new year. No festoons, no posters, no buildings decorated (as is done on December 31st). However, from Sheraton hotel onwards, it was a different world altogether.

I don't think I have seen so many people at one place except at the political rallies! Flowers, balloons, masks, pink cotton candy,

splashes of colour everywhere, snake charmers, street vendors, people selling cool glasses of lassi, sugarcane juice, it was a hundred-year of our culture on one street. As we pushed through, it was a picture of uniformity in diversity – people of all ages, religion, walks of life, women dressed in white and wearing red and *beli ful*, and men in light coloured panjabis.

For all of us the first stop would of course be the Botomul. The loud speakers at botomul were never the greatest. But as long as you caught the snippets of the familiar lyrics, the pakhwaj, the midongom, you couldn't help feel the vibrancy in the air. Even at 6 in the morning, the sitting area would be crammed, and there would be a few hundred more in the shades having that thick tea in the earthen mugs, or enjoying the steaming *bhapa pitnas*. And your kind is got used to the creaking of the nagardola in the background – two people tugging at the highly suspicious wooden

structure and a dozen people screaming in delight each time it made one more successful turn. There would naturally be the vendors at every corner, the smart ones picking out the romantic couples and selling them anything from flowers to *kodmas*. The most popular item would however be that pink dugdugi, and anyone and everyone would naturally buy it for ten *takas* and happily play it, letting out bursts of laughter at the resulting cacophony.

As soon as Chhayanaut's programme would draw to a close, there would be a mad rush to grab some breakfast. Parathas, luchi, vegetables, thick curry, gillapis sizzling invitingly in the frying pans, or even an early *panta bhat*, *bhortas* and *lilish*. This was the day for trying all the dishes and there would never be a lack of enthusiasts.

Out of Ramna, there would be the stages set up on roadsides, on trucks and pavements all playing



Chhayanant's Noboborsho at Botomul

different types of songs. As you walk along the road, it would be like a walk from one world to the other as *gonoshongee* slowly diffused into *lalon* that in turn slowly diffused into *baul*. The bauls I loved the most. Clad in bright orange, the dotara in their hands they never

failed to excite the crowd with their vigorous dance in tune with the thumping beat of drums.

By this time, people would be gathering at the Arts College for the procession. Even if you have never been to the campus, you could tell that this was the Institute of Fine

Arts. A huge paper mach figure waiting to be carried out, people wearing the bright masks, head gear, and of course, your face would be painted. And at the gates would wait the horse carriages, the floats, the band party, people dressed in a particular theme – a traditional bridal party, farmers, folk singers and jatra characters. Some, already drained from the morning's event, would happily be stretched on the lawns, engaged in frivolous *addas*. With the sun now fully up, the ice cream and especially the kulfis would be the busiest. Prices are easily doubled, but there has been never a short queue.

What I am driving at is, despite the heat, the crowd, the long walk from stage to stage, the dust, nothing would seem to wipe that gleam from people's eyes. It's almost a celebration of who we are, and how uniquely we celebrate our new year, different from other nationalities the world over. How

common is it, for instance, to celebrate the new year with the sunrise instead of the middle of the night?

For the last couple of years there has naturally been a change. I remember how the bomb exploded some rows from where I was standing, and that sickening feeling will haunt us forever. Now there are as many plain clothes police as there are genuine audiences. Parents warn us of not joining in the rally. Instead of one huge rally, there would be many different ones depending on which cultural organisation you belong to. Interestingly there are also more video cameras around, people filming every nook and corner, as if realising that they are recording live history.

But happily enough the celebrations have also spread to other parts of the city outside the campus. No longer is the campus like an island unto itself. There would be week-long melas fairs,

mina bazaars and shows. And it's encouraging to see how the rock bands are popularising traditional folk music. And there are a lot more shops other than Aarong that are now selling local handicrafts. Even the traditional *potua* is now the in-thing.

Now a good thousand miles from Botomul, the best that I can do is playback those wonderful images of nobo borsho. But for all of you who can give it a go waking up an extra three hours early and be one with the crowd it's there live! One thing is for certain no matter which part of the world you are in, no matter how many years into the future you look, the experience of connecting to your roots, is one memory that will last a lifetime.

Aziz Mallick is a Corporate Finance Analyst, J.P.Morgan Chase, London.