

Pahela Baishakh

A pledge to defend ethos

THE day is looked upon as the harbinger of all that is pure and clean for the people of the land, hence it is called Shuva Nababarsha or happy New Year. Traditionally, it is considered that the rain and accompanying wind in the month of Baishakh would wash away the blemishes of the past year and usher in a new chapter in the lives of the people that would turn out to be happy and prosperous. No wonder, the day becomes an occasion of joy and merrymaking for Bengalees all over the world.

But Pahela Baishakh is much more than simply a day of merrymaking. We observe the day more as an occasion to uphold the Bengali culture, tradition and heritage so that the innate ethos can be carried down to our next generations. Through getting immersed in the traditional celebrations we look back at our roots and discover anew our pristine identity as Bengalees. And one of the most significant aspects of the day has been its secular character, as people belonging to different religious faiths and denominations take part in the celebrations with greater spontaneity than they do on any other occasion.

But lately, the essence of our culture that Baishakh embodies has come under threat from some religious bigots who are bent on destroying the history of tolerance and religious harmony in the country. These obscurantist elements are preaching their own brand of skewed philosophy to reap political benefits through creating anarchy in society. Therefore, on Pahela Baishakh it remains our solemn responsibility to stand up as a wall to thwart the machination of these elements.

On this day the nation takes a renewed pledge to march forward to build a happy and prosperous future for the people.

Shuvo Nababarsha to our readers.

Can an elected govt behave like this?

Announce an independent inquiry

YET another incident of police firing at Kansat with six more deaths to the already horrendous casualty toll. Days into the unabated crisis and the heat of discontent simmering amongst the public of an entire village and yet no minister or a lawmaker, or a high ranking trouble shooter of any consequence felt it necessary to either arrive at the places of occurrence or even issue a statement for the benefit of the people at large. On the contrary, police reinforcements at the site and their interventions only helped in further aggravating the situation in the absence of any robust approach to the public grievance-related situation of a simple straightforward nature.

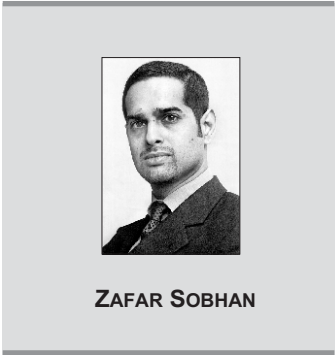
We are simply appalled by some of the highhanded actions of the police. A few journalists were severely beaten and many were barred entry at places so as to shut off news emanation from the raided spots. Notwithstanding the blanket imposition of section 144, it is shocking to learn that members of the police hunted down villagers in their homes in the darkness of night, beat the inmates of the house, men and women indiscriminately. The way the police swooped on the villagers it looked as though they were engaged in a battle against some insurgents. There are also allegations of looting of valuables from some households including cash. The fear was so gripping that many fled their homes and took shelter in neighbouring villages.

We are shocked and do find it absurd as to how such a medieval style repression can be allowed by any elected government? How shameful, that even to this day, hollow political pep talk continues behind the scenes at the elected public representative level with no visible attempts made to resolve the deadlock through amicable discussion and mutual consultation.

We urge the administration to move fast and resolve the deteriorating crisis to prevent any further loss of innocent lives. At the same time, in the interest of justice and towards restoring of confidence of the people of the locality, the government must also identify those responsible both at the field and other levels for this carnage and take appropriate action against them as per the law of the land. Considerations must also be given to adequately compensate the families who have lost their near and dear ones in police firing and whose households have been vandalised.

We demand that the government announce an independent judicial inquiry into the whole affair.

Image and reality



ZAFAR SOBHAN

ENOUGH. What exactly, one wonders, will it take before people in this country sit up and take note of the bitter and brutal armed struggle, between locals on one side, and law enforcement authorities and ruling alliance activists on the other, that has consumed Kansat (in Chapainawabganj some 250 kms north-west of Dhaka) for the past three months.

The conflict, that has been simmering since late January, exploded again on April 6 when four people were killed in clashes between local demonstrators and ruling alliance activists who had attacked them, and carried on into April 12 when a police attack on demonstrators left six more dead.

The ruling alliance government appears to have been so focused in recent months on resuscitating its image outside the country that it has seen fit to abandon even the rudiments of decent governance.

If there can be any more revealing picture of a government out of touch with its citizenry than the events in Bangladesh of the past week or so, I can't think of one.

On the one hand, the government is still basking in the glow of the adulatory Time magazine cover story; on the other, it has presided over the descent of almost an entire upazila into chaos and anarchy.

Let us recap. The current debacle started innocuously enough at

the end of last year when local villagers in Kansat formed themselves into the Palli Bidyut Unnayan Sangram Committee to petition the authorities for uninterrupted power supply, complaining that the local electricity authority was charging them Tk 10 per month as "rent" for electricity meters and that they were having to pay as much as Tk 120 a month minimum charge for sub-standard or non-existent service.

This minor matter could easily have been dealt with had the authorities taken the time to meet with the leaders of the PBUSC and given their legitimate grievances a hearing. Instead, after repeated contemptuous dismissals of their petitioning, the committee began to hold small and then large-scale demonstrations to press their demands.

The official response was police firing on demonstrators who had laid siege to the local electricity authority on January 4 that killed two, and the subsequent arrest of the three leaders of the committee.

Three weeks later a second agitation to protest the arrests and enforce the committee's demands was held, in which roads and highways were blocked and the local electricity authority was barricaded, and which turned into a pitched battle between law enforcement authorities and the demonstrators.

Six police vehicles were set on fire by the demonstrators in clashes with the law enforcers that ended with over a hundred injured and eight dead.

Tensions have been simmering ever since. On April 6, four people were killed and over a hundred injured when another demonstration held by the committee was attacked by ruling alliance activists.

The committee responded by calling an indefinite hartal and took action to put up barricades and sever road communications throughout the upazila, leading to more or less continual pitched battle between the demonstrators and police since then.

Section 144 was imposed on April 9. This was the prelude to massive collective punishment of the villages involved in the movement on the part of the law enforcers, who indiscriminately raided villages, broke into, looted, ransacked, and burned houses, and viciously beat up scores of locals, including women and children.

Six more locals were killed by the law enforcers during their midnight raid of April 9 on some dozen villages, bringing the total killed since the movement began to twenty.

Is it too much to ask what exactly is going on here and how is it that the authorities can have let the situation deteriorate to its present pass?

This continuing saga is in many ways a neat encapsulation of this

administration's failings and failures.

The first failure is the administration's failure to either generate sufficient electricity or to provide anything approaching a steady and secure supply of power. The main reason for the former is massive corruption in the power sector and the astronomical kick-backs that have to be paid to influential power brokers close to the ruling alliance senior leadership in order to set up and operate a power plant.

The kick-backs demanded by the power brokers are so extortionate as to make it an uneconomic venture to invest in the sector, with the result that virtually no new power generation capacity has been added in the past four and a half years.

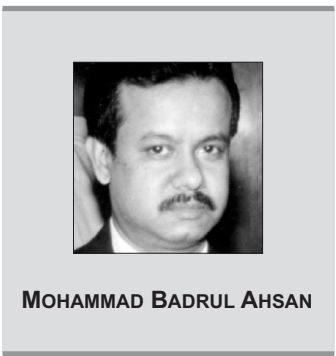
The second failure is the petty corruption at the local level that imposes a "rental charge" for use of electricity meter and a minimum monthly charge for subscribers even though the service provided is either intermittent at best or more often non-existent.

The third failure is the high-handedness of the authorities who arrogantly dismiss the legitimate demands of electricity subscribers, who understandably are chagrined at having to pay extortionate monthly charges for lousy service (or no service), and the inability of the citizenry to petition peacefully for change and receive any kind of a hearing from the authorities.

STRAIGHT TALK

Meanwhile, the government has apparently been busy engineering a propaganda campaign to make it look good in the eyes of the international community. Here's a piece of advice for the government: if you want to maintain a good image, it helps not to shoot down people who are demonstrating for electricity. Nothing captures the moral bankruptcy and simple cluelessness of the government better than the juxta-position of these two episodes.

The second man



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

SHE has been asked to think again what she has been thinking again and again. It has been said that the heart must never come before the head, because what intelligence holds like riverbanks, emotion gives away in spate. But she has been thinking of it for last few days, her mind scattered like the dust in a storm. What does it matter to a wretched woman, whose fate, like the used goods, is to go from hand to hand?

She has been asked to marry again, and her family insists that she should do it fast because youth, like time and tide, doesn't wait. The family priest talked about the Dharmashastra and explained to her what the Manusmriti said. Ne stree svatantyam arahathi: "a woman is undeserving for independence". A woman needs the support of a man for the same reason creepers need the support of a frame. It is even worse for a Hindu widow, he said. She is lucky if she can take another man. Else, she will have to count her grim days in Vrindavan.

But how could she take another man when the memories of her dead husband still burned inside the heart! He was a good man, who loved his wife, a man who talked about the future and children, until he bled to death under a mugger's knife. It was a precious life taken away for a small sum of cash. The vapours rise to her eyes as her voice chokes on tears, every time she shares her grief with family and friends.

It is said that one must learn to accept casualties in life, because there is no time to mourn the fallen in the midst of a fight. Still how could she forget the man whose memory comes to her mind as naturally as night after day? He woke up when the first light of the morning swam into the house like seawater lapping at distant shores. He whispered into her ears before he left for work that love of her always danced in his blood. Then he never returned because a senseless killer took his life. When she looked at the blood-soaked clothes, she felt as though so much love was splattered in vain. It drained her more than it drained

CROSS TALK

She married a man who abruptly died, and now she has to marry again, if not the younger brother of her husband, then another man. There is no second chance in life, unless there is a second man. How does it distinguish her from those women in the notorious trade? There is no freedom in the body unless there is also freedom in the mind. This is the question, which will haunt her no matter which man she gets to choose.

him!

The mother came to her, sobbing more times than she could speak. She lamented that a Hindu woman, once widowed, is twice scorned, because the gods in heaven like rest of the world blamed that she had devoured her man. Then the mother described how religious texts like Skanda Purana urged to avoid the widows, because they were more inauspicious than all other inauspicious things in the world.

The mother also described the plight of widows, reminding her of an aunt of hers who worked like an unpaid servant in her husband's house for 30 long years after he died. When her husband died three women from the barber class swooped on her to tear off the ornaments on her. Then she was left alone and nobody approached her on that day even to offer water. In the funeral procession of her husband, she was made to walk 200 feet behind other women lest her shadow fell on them and brought bad luck. After 13 days, a barber came to shave her head. In old age, the poor thing was sent to Vrindavan

to spend her life chanting in the temples from dawn to dusk.

The mother reminded that a widow is condemned to an austere life. She is made to wear red or white sari without ornaments and eat one single meal in a day. She is forbidden in family functions lest her presence boded evil to those who saw her face. The Hindu widow transforms into some kind of a freak and slogs through life like a shadow of death.

Yet the daughter has been thinking again and again how life is going to be better than death, how she is going to look at another man, if she couldn't blink once without having the face of her dead husband flash in her mind! But the mother cautioned her daughter again and again. She couldn't live for a man who was no more real than a piping dream.

So she has been asked to make up her mind. Why is it wrong if she were to marry the younger brother of her dead husband? She tried to reason again and again that this is a man who grew up right in front of her eyes, the kid whom she watched

growing tall in arms and legs, moustache and beard sprouting in his face. How could she marry this sapling of a man who has been like a son to her?

There is simply no mechanism for successfully petitioning the authorities, and thus no accountability built into the system. The fourth failure is the order that appears to have been given to law enforcement authorities, who have apparently been authorized to impose collective punishment on the villages concerned, and to indiscriminately raid, loot, and burn villages, more like brigands and bandits than police personnel tasked with restoring peace and security.

At every step of the way, the government has acted with a combination of arrogance, barbarism, and incompetence that almost beggars belief. The continued mishandling of the escalating crisis by the administration has now created the present anarchy.

This is not to absolve the demonstrators from their responsibility for the death and destruction that has occurred as a result of their violent agitation, and there is certainly blame on both sides. But by far the lion's share of the blame must go to the authorities who refused to give the PBUSC a hearing and authorized the subsequent crack-downs. Let us not forget that the law enforcement personnel have been armed with guns and tear-gas, whereas the villagers have been either unarmed or have faced them with weapons such as sticks and machetes, and that there can be zero justification for midnight raids by law enforcement to burn, loot, and ransack.

But the point is that had the situation been handled with a modicum of good sense or sensitivity from the start, then things would never have come to such a pass. The carnage and continuing violence in Kansat is even more problematic for the government than appears at first glance. The locality has long been a BNP strong-hold, and many of those now taking up arms against the authorities are long-time party supporters.

The anger that is boiling over against the government cannot be blamed on the media or opposition provocateurs. It is very real, has been stoked by the government's very real failures, is far from dissipated, and all indications are that it will only get worse in the coming months.

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Nor is this the only example of civil disobedience against ruling alliance misrule in recent months. In other parts of the north and north-west, farmers have rioted as a result of the government's inability to provide them with power, fuel, and fertilizer in a timely manner and at a reasonable cost, and have broken into fertilizer depots and barricaded trucks on the highway.

The public anger towards the government for its four and a half years of misrule is quite genuine, and the government would do well to understand this simple ground reality rather than to continue to believe blindly in its own propaganda.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Peace in CHT: A dream or reality?

NURUL HUDA

WHETHER peace in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), covering one tenth of the country's total area, will remain a dream or become a reality still seems a big question to be resolved. The government side would argue in favour of implementation of those points of the Accord which remain unimplemented. The leaders of CHT Regional Council and Parbatitya Chattagram Jana Shanghati Samity (PCJSS) are, on the other hand, suspicious of the sincerity of the government.

This discord between the two sides was adequately demonstrated when LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and PCJSS leaders were heard making remarks contradictory to each other after attending the 10th Cabinet Committee meeting on implementation of CHT Peace Accord on April 5. The PCJSS leaders were heard

saying that they won't expect any substantial progress in implementation of the Accord under the present government. Bhuiyan was, however, hopeful of its implementation phase by phase. CHT, which is home to nearly 1.3 million people and known for largest concentration of 11 ethnic minority communities, is highly resourceful. Kaptai lake itself can become a source of huge fish supply if properly maintained. There can be eco-tourism in the region if there is lasting peace. The resources of the region remain mostly untapped in absence of stable peace.

Reports of clashes, abduction and recovery of arms and ammunitions reach us from the hill districts as the Peace Accord which was signed in 1998, between the government and PCJSS headed by Jyotindriyo Bodhi Priyo Larma (Shantu Larma), is yet to ensure stable peace in the region.

Shantu Larma, Chairman of

Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council has been demanding quick and full implementation of the Peace Accord in the region.

The government seems to be in a dilemma because if the Accord is fully implemented it would make Shantu Larma happy but United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) and a section of settlers unhappy. The settlers are afraid of facing eviction if the Accord is fully implemented.

The problem in the CHT region began with the act of dispossession of tribal land rights in 1959 when the country's only hydroelectricity project Kaptai Dam was built across the river Karnaphuli with the financial support of the United States Agency for International

Development (USAID). With the implementation of the project an area of 250 square miles of prime cultivable lands were inundated and displaced were about one lakh ethnic minorities, mostly Chakmas from their holdings. A large number of those displaced sought shelter across the borders in India's Arunachal and Mizoram states.

Efforts initiated for restoration of "protected status" granted under the provisions of the Hill Tracts Regulation did not get positive response from the then head of government after liberation of Bangladesh. The then AL government brushed aside the demand as it believed that the ethnic minorities were not with Bengali nationalism. The successive governments of

Bangladesh have, however, offered olive branch to the ethnic rebels who were engaged in bush war in the hill forest terrain since 1975. Though not much was achieved yet the formation of different levels of committees and parleys with the rebels suggest certain degrees of seriousness in finding solution to the problem.

Begum Khaleda Zia's government of 1991 can claim some credit for creating a congenial atmosphere for a political dialogue which led to the unilateral announcement of cease fire by members of Shanti Bahini, which has been disbanded since 1998 following the signing of the Peace Accord during Sheikh Hasina's government.

Reports of frequent clashes between the settlers and the ethnic communities come from the hill districts to the concern of all of us. The recovery of fire arms often in abandoned condition from the region is another cause of grave concern.

Even in the first week of the current month clashes between the settlers and the ethnic communities in Mahalchhari in Khagrachhari district left a couple of hundreds injured. Several people belonging to the ethnic minorities even left their houses out of fear.

Though neither side filed any complaints with the police till the evening of April 4, the police on their own initiated a case and arrested two dozens people. The

ethnic minority communities blamed the settlers for attacks while the settlers blamed the members of ethnic communities for the preplanned attacks and plunder.

The settlers living in the region protested the Accord through hoisting black flags and widespread street agitation as they apprehended eviction from their holdings in the process of implementation of the Accord. Many settlers including Abdul Wadud Bhuiyan, MP and also chairman of CHT Development Board went into hiding as they were known for their anti-Accord stand.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, who was then Leader of the Opposition was also opposed to the Accord. Expressing solidarity with the settlers she led a Road March to the CHT describing the Peace Accord as not in conformity with the country's constitution.

In this context, Deputy Minister for CHT Affairs Moni Swapan

Dewan's opinion was sought who attributed the prevailing problem of CHT to economic disparity and emphasised the need for balanced development. On the Peace Accord, he said, it should be made acceptable to all communities avoiding the blame game. CHT problem, he said, should be treated as a national issue and not the problem of BNP or that of Awami League.

Dewan said, "It won't be possible to resolve the CHT problem unless and until the national leaders stop politicking over the region."

On reports of clashes between the ethnic minorities and the settlers, he said, some vested interest groups in the region, are active to keep alive political unrest and destroy communal harmony.

Yet, despite discords, majority of the people wish let there be peace, whichever way possible.

Nurul Huda is a Special Correspondent of BSS