Before I end, let me refer quickly to one particular evidence of living multi-cultural integration, which is largely forgotten now, but has, in fact, a remarkably long history, in the form of the Bengali calendar, called the "San." It is the only extant calendar in India in which a remnant influence of Emperor Akbar's abortive attempt at establishing an all-India non-denominational calendar, the Tarikh-Ilahi, survives.

elected communist government in the world), class and inequality have played the leading part in making religious politics look oddly dilapidated and medieval.

When Bengal's history is discussed, it is possible to point both to great records of multi-cultural tolerance and pride and to outbursts of bigotry and sectarianism. But the invoking of history is never quite independent of its contemporary relevance. The modern European or American looks for sources of the "Western tradition" in, for example, ancient Greece and Rome, and rather than searching "Western" ancient in the much longer history and larger spatial coverage of the rules of Goths, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vikings, and others.

The choice from history is, in this sense, always selective, when the focus is on its contemporary relevance (rather than attempting to portray some kind of an aggregate picture of "what is was like then," or, for that matter, what would emerge from random selections from history).[1] What is relevant, therefore, is to see what was there that is of interest today, and this is the way the present secularist and tolerant culture in Bengal, on both sides of the border, has tended to draw on Bengal's long history. And that history does indeed offer a huge store of multi-identity interactions and creativity.

Before I end, let me refer quickly to one particular evidence of living multi-cultural integration, which is largely forgotten now, but has, in fact, a remarkably long history, in the form of the Bengali calendar, called the "San." It is the only extant calendar in India in which a remnant influence of Emperor Akbar's abortive attempt at establishing an all-India non-denominational calendar, the Tarikh-Ilahi, survives.

As the end of the first millennium in the lunar Muslim calendar, Hijri, approached in the late sixteenth century, Akbar wanted a multi-cultural calendar for India, that would be solar, like the Hindu or Jain or Parsee calendars, combined with some features of the Hijri in it. The zero year was fixed at 1556 (the year of Akbar's ascendance to the throne), which corresponded to 1478 in Hindu Saka calendar and to 963 in the Muslim Hijri.

The Tarikh-Ilahi never caught on, despite its use in Akbar's own court. But it influenced the traditional Bengali calendar which got renumbered at the zero year of Akbar's Tarikh-Ilahi, putting the clock back from the Hindu 1478 to the Muslim 963. However it remained solar as in the earlier Bengali calendar, so in the years since that time, the slow-moving Bengali San (as slow as the Hindu Saka calendar and the Christian Gregorian calendar) has moved rather less forward than the Muslim lunar Hijri calendar (with its year of 354 days, 8 hours, and 45 minutes in solar reckoning).[2]

It is year 1413 in Bengali San now. How do we interpret it, then? The answer is that it commemorates, in effect, Prophet Mohammad's move from Mecca to Medina, the origin of the Hijri calendar, in a mixed lunar-solar system of counting -- Muslim lunar until 963 and Hindu solar since then to 1413 today.

A religious Hindu may or may not be aware of this link with the Prophet when he or she invokes this date in a Hindu ceremony (the San is important *inter alia* for these ceremonies as well), but this is inescapable given the integrated nature of Bengali traditions, going back many centuries.

I leave the large community of followers of Samuel Huntington's thesis of "the Clash of Civilizations" to figure out whether the Bengali San is a part of what he calls the "Hindu civilization" or of the "Muslim civilization," between which such a sharp dissonance is seen. History is, often enough, not as confrontational as it looks to cultural separatists.

1 I have discussed this methodological point in "Our Past and Our Present," Economic and Political Weekly, November 2006.

2 On this, see my *The Argumentative Indian* (Delhi and London: Penguin Books, 2005).

Amartya Sen *won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998 and is one of the world's foremost public intellectuals and scholars.*

A Wish

Shamsur Rahman

If I live for more than four decades
I'll be writing.
If I live for less than two decades
I'll be writing.
If I live for one more decade
I'll be writing.
If I live for two or four years
I'll be writing.
If I live for one more year
I'll be writing.
If I live for another month
I'll be writing.
If I live for one more day
I'll be writing.

Translation: Fakrul Alam