

## The CA's address to the nation

*There must be no deviation from plan he has outlined*

His address to the nation on Thursday, Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed provided a clear, definitive road map to a restoration of elected government. We welcome his statement that general elections will be held before the end of the year 2008. We expect that the CA's speech will now be followed by concrete measures, namely, a setting out of plans for implementing all the reform measures that must precede the holding of a free and fair polling. The CA's emphasis on the need to clean up the accumulated mess of the years and his appeal for patience will be taken in the right spirit by the country.

A good number of steps now must be taken in the roughly twenty-month period remaining before the elections. Obviously, the state of emergency now in force must be lifted in good time in order for the political parties to undertake their campaigning. Before that happens, though, the government must permit a resumption of indoor politics to enable the politicians to do their own bit about not only shaping their own strategy but also to mull over the reforms they need to effect within their own organisations. One of the principal goals of the caretaker government is weeding out the role of black money, muscle power and all other corruptive elements from the electoral process. Since political parties too share the view of the administration, it makes sense for them as well as civil society to be consulted by the government on these issues in the run-up to the polls. A meaningful dialogue between the Election Commission and the political stakeholders ought to be initiated at the earliest.

There cannot be any deviation from the plans outlined by the Chief Adviser. We believe that the intentions of the government, post-CA speech, must come in cast iron guarantees. Those guarantees include a focus on the preparation of a voter list, a task the Election Commission must get into expeditiously and purposefully. Additionally, the reforms agenda outlined by the EC must now move from theory to implementation in order to buttress its plans for a healthy election that can truly serve as guidelines for all future elections as well.

Alongside the plans for general elections, there must not be any let-up in the anti-corruption drive launched by the government. Action initiated against corrupt elements in the last few months will definitely complement the programme of the administration toward the inauguration of a proper, democratic and responsive political process in Bangladesh. The CA's speech, we might add, has cleared the air of the questions and suspicions lately being raised by some quarters. We commend the CA on his address.

## Baishakh 1414

*A time to celebrate, to redeem the old pledge*

Baishakh is that time of year when we celebrate ourselves through recalling the cultural traditions we are heir to. It is an occasion for us as a nation to retrace our steps to the first tentative steps our ancestors took in the inauguration of the heritage we are today part of. As Baishakh dawns today, in this year of 1414, it becomes our collective responsibility as a people to renew the old pledge and rekindle the old dreams. More importantly, it is a time for us to sit back and dwell on all the achievements we have made and all the failures we have experienced in the series of generational journeys we have made through time.

In a very broad sense, Pahela Baishakh is a time for us to go looking for our roots, a job we will do yet once more today. The various festivals that will break out across the country in celebration of the day will be a testament to the values, social as well as cultural, that we have always held dear. The explosion of arts and craft, the magnificence of song and the magic of poetry are what will symbolise the glory of the day. And the glory will reflect itself through the tempestuousness with which nature, in the form of Baishakh rains and storms, paints the land. In other words, it is a sense of idealism laced with a necessary component of reality that we will observe on the first day of the Bengali New Year. The reality is that for all our adherence to and upholding of heritage, there remains a consciousness of what we yet need to do in order for the country to measure up to our expectations of it. More precisely, it is a matter of what we as Bengalis need to do to redeem the pledge we have made to ourselves over time.

Our political struggles and triumphs, ranging from a movement for autonomy to a spirited war of liberation, will remain an inconclusive tale unless we are able to create for ourselves a society that respects citizens, upholds their rights and sustains the old values passed on to them by those who came before them.

Pahela Baishakh is a dawning. It is a time for old aspirations to be refurbished, for new dreams to be forged. In Baishakh 1414, it is these thoughts that we are drawn to.



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

I rarely get an opportunity to write about cultural events in my column. Almost all of them deal with issues related to domestic politics, international affairs or macro-economic denominators.

Today, I have been fortunate. I will start by wishing my readers 'Shuvo nobo barsho'. The date for publication of my regular column has coincided most happily with the advent of Baishakh and the Bangla New Year. We are stepping into 1414.

I will also take this opportunity to record a few observations about this important festival which has become a cultural icon and assumed a special place in the hearts and minds of nearly 250 million Bangla speaking people scattered all over the world.

Professor Anisuzzaman, eminent litterateur, once remarked that festivals tell us a lot about a nation – its history and tradition, religious beliefs and cultural patterns, ways of life and aesthetic development. How true!

We are a new country but one with a long historical past. Our history goes back to over three millennia. This delta has been home over the centuries for people with different religious faiths. We have seen the Buddhist civilisation rise and being overtaken by the Hindu and subsequently, the Islamic faiths. The presence of the British Empire brought with it Christianity and a different set of values.

Nevertheless, despite the diversity and various ethnic origins, we have lived together in harmony and

## Celebrating the Bangla new year

enjoyed certain cultural high-points and events endowed with universal appeal. Both sacred and secular festivals have inter-woven and created a rich tapestry that is now considered to be a widely acceptable meeting-point. Pahela Baishakh and the beginning of the Bangla New Year is just such an example.

Although this New Year in the Bangla calendar has been enumerated as 1414, the history of the Bangla New Year is not very old.

clear up all dues on the last day of Chaitra, the last month of the Bangla year. On the next day, or the first day of the New Year, landlords would entertain their tenants with traditional sweets. The occasion was also given an air of gaiety through the holding of fairs in villages along with other festivities. Dressed in new clothes, Bangalees exchanged visits and generally enjoyed themselves. In due course, over time, the occasion evolved, and became for all Bangla speaking people, a part of

in the growth of neighbourhood related activities. Cultural links cut across the divide.

The artistic and intellectual aspects of this day can also be used to promote economic activities and folk musical entertainment. This can be achieved through performances of Jatra, Palagan, Kavigan, Jarigan, Gambhiragan, Gazirgan and Alkagan.

A predominantly rural country, we have a rich folk heritage that also includes Baul, Marfati, Murshidi and

employment but will also provide gender empowerment. Micro-finance institutions need to consider this possibility with seriousness. Some of this is already taking place, but more needs to be done.

Many old festivals connected with Bangla New Year's day have all but disappeared in the past fifty years. New festivals have been added in their place. With the abolition of the Zemindari system, 'Punnya', connected with the closing of land revenue accounts has

of people gather early in the morning under the banyan tree at Ramna Park. They welcome the New Year with Tagore's song 'Esho hey Baishakh, esho' (Come O Baishakh, come) and innovations like 'pantha bhaat and elish'. A similar welcoming ceremony is also held at the Institute of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka. Students and teachers of the Institute take out a colourful procession and parade round the campus, with some wearing giant paper-mache masks, representing birds and animal faces. Newspapers bring out special supplements and the electronic media give special coverage to cultural functions.

All these are good. However, personally, I would like to see such festivity replicated at all administrative levels -- all the way down to each police station. After all, this day has now become the symbol of Bangla resurgence.

In Bangladesh, celebration of this day began as a part of the cultural movement of the 1960s that adopted Bengali nationalism as its theme. It added a new dimension to the political movement. As such, it is important that we expand the emphasis of this festival to the grassroots level. We should also try to find a place for it in the international calendar of festivals, as has been done so successfully by Thailand for its own ethnic festivals.

As president of the Bangladesh Folklore Research Centre, I believe that it is important that plans are urgently undertaken and implemented by our Ministries of Education and Culture to foster, revive and eventually spread these festivals associated with the Bangla New Year. Funds must be found for this purpose.

It is true that the most colourful

Bangla New Year's day festival takes place in Dhaka. It is probably so because it is the capital and facilities exist here. Large numbers

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador who can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

## POST BREAKFAST

In Bangladesh, celebration of this day began as a part of the cultural movement of the 1960s that adopted Bengali nationalism as its theme. It added a new dimension to the political movement. As such, it is important that we expand the emphasis of this festival to the grassroots level. We should also try to find a place for it in the international calendar of festivals, as has been done so successfully by Thailand for its own ethnic festivals.

It can be used to promote tourism not only for non-Bangladeshis but also for expatriate Bangalees.

Mughal Emperor Akbar started this calendar year on 10 March 1585, but it came into effect from 16 March, 1586 -- the day of his ascension to the throne.

The introduction of this calendar was based on an earlier format that was modified to streamline the collection of agricultural taxes. Under the Mughals, such taxes were collected according to the Hijri calendar. However, as this was lunar in nature, it did not necessarily coincide with the fiscal. As a result, farmers were hard pressed to pay taxes out of season. This persuaded Emperor Akbar, a pragmatic person, to seek reforms. A renowned scholar and astronomer, Fatehullah Shirazi, was entrusted with the task of creating the new Bangla year. His efforts resulted in the juxtaposition of the Hijri calendar and the Bangla solar calendar. This New Year subsequently became known as 'Bangabda' or Bengali year.

Cultural historian S.C. Mohanta has remarked that celebration of Pahela Baishakh started from Akbar's reign. It was customary to

their domestic and social life marked with merriment.

The financial implications of Chaitra and Baishakh have now receded in the overall context of the State. However, even now, the main event of this, the first day of the Bangla Year, is associated with the opening of a 'Halkhata' or new book of accounts. This financial tradition has continued in our rural areas as well as in mafassil towns and in some of the Hindu dominated older sections of urban areas e.g. Sankharipatti, Tantibazar, Chawkbazar etc. in Dhaka. Jewellers specially follow this cultural practice. They invite the customers to share sweets on this day and renew their business relationship.

I believe that a secular cultural festival like Pahela Baishakh is a good least common denominator to bring forth greater understanding among communities. It is a good antidote against the spreading scourge of fundamentalism. The sociological aspects of this day also hold a significant place, particularly

Bhatiali songs. The relevant authorities may like to consider organising special competitions on a national basis for such cultural events. The selective process, through elimination, could identify eventual group winners at the national level. They could then collectively perform in the stadiums of important cities and raise money for charity. Why not? CDs and DVDs of their performances could then be sent abroad for sale among the expatriate Bangla speaking communities. We are talking here of a potential market of one million.

Economic activities could also include competitions in cooking, baking and preparing traditional pickles. Handicrafts, terracotta pieces, paper-mache figures and toys prepared in villages could also be the focus of Baishakhis fairs.

The winners in these competitions could be accorded national recognition and later supported with loans on soft terms if they want venture capital for setting up their own businesses. Such economic activity will not only generate

disappeared. Similarly, we hardly see kite-flying rivalries in neighbourhoods, as was the custom in our childhood. The famous colourful bull racing carnival has also, most sadly, all but disappeared in Munshiganj. Some other popular events like cockfights, pigeon racing and boat races, still continue, but most rarely. They are no longer included in the fold of mass sporting activity. 'Bali' or wrestling is practiced in Chittagong and 'Gambhira' is still nurtured in Rajshahi. But fans of both are on the decline.

As president of the Bangladesh Folklore Research Centre, I believe that it is important that plans are urgently undertaken and implemented by our Ministries of Education and Culture to foster, revive and eventually spread these festivals associated with the Bangla New Year. Funds must be found for this purpose.

It is true that the most colourful

Bangla New Year's day festival takes place in Dhaka. It is probably so because it is the capital and facilities exist here. Large numbers

Bangladesh on its track and create an atmosphere of hope in the hearts and minds of Bangladeshis.

Little did they learn from history that trying to rewrite and distort history can span perhaps five, ten or twenty years or may be an entire generation but this time frame is a spectrum of atom in the vast expanse of time.

Little did they know that for their selfish means they were deceiving an entire nation by trying to use the

mantra of Dr. Goebbels, the

Bangladesh on its track and create an atmosphere of hope in the hearts and minds of Bangladeshis.

Hopefully in the near future or down memory lane after centuries when the history of Bangladesh will again be written or movies made by foreigners and locals, then the rightful heirs to their rightful places in history will stand out with the greatest Bangali of all times, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the centre flanked by many.

Historians, critics, filmmakers, thinkers, intellectuals will have to again resort for information and evidences in the great archives of the world for newspapers, communiques, videos and books and the thousands of reports from reporters of all the major newspapers and magazines of the world who covered Bangladesh's pre and post independence period and those inquisitive minds will find a world of information on who was the man of the hour during

independence movement.

History is speaking correctly now and it will do so correctly down the centuries as Salaluddin and Gandhi's legacy could not be distorted nor could any body else's.

With affairs looking so encouraging now in the very near future this country of immense potential will truly become the Sonar Bangla of Rabindranath and the Bangabandhu. Let justice be done to the man and his men, the freedom fighters (the Mukti joddhas) who sacrificed so much for us to live with heads held high.

Abdus Salam is Director, Mother Language Lovers of the World, Vancouver.

## Truth never dies

ABDUS SALAM

If one has seen the movie 'Gandhi' by Sir Richard Attenborough and the movie 'Kingdom of Heaven' made by Scott Ridley one cannot help but reminisce on the terrible truth and that is, truth triumphs at the end.

With thorough surgical precision and heartless ingratitude and verily to the disdain of millions of Bangalis in Bangladesh and the diasporas abroad, the last government and the group who were opposed to the very creation of Bangladesh wanted to recreate and rewrite Bangladesh's history of

voided of the actuals. Thus Mahatma Gandhi came out alive true into facts and figures and his leadership with the exemplary portrayal of his political acumen all came out in the film as was the case and as per history's dictio. It also spoke of his relationship with the Indian masses which included all the strata of Indian society including the lowest of the low whom he called harjians upto the top aristocrat and Brahmin like the Nehrus.

The maker of the film did not

Hollywood and probably a Christian or a Jew produced it residing somewhere in the United States completely alien to the Islamic religion and culture. Even then because Salaluddin belongs to the ages, the makers of this particular film painstakingly went and researched into the minutest details of this great man's quality as a warrior, administrator, his humane qualities and overall his leadership qualities which had such a profound and everlasting

very rare in world history and that rarity of character, organization, galvanizing human force and spirit and the magnanimity towards forgiving a vanquished enemy was seen once again in the newly created Bangladesh in 1971 when the father of the nation with such rarity of

forgiving one's foe forgave the conspirators who conspired against the creation of this country.

Very sadly the same people whom Bangabandhu pardoned

brushed aside and swept under the carpet by these very men for a lot many years.

Little did they learn from history that trying to rewrite and distort history can span perhaps five, ten or twenty years or may be an entire generation but this time frame is a spectrum of atom in the vast expanse of time.

Little did they know that for their selfish means they were deceiving an entire nation by trying to use the

mantra of Dr. Goebbels, the

Bangladesh on its track and create an atmosphere of hope in the hearts and minds of Bangladeshis.

Hopefully in the near future or down memory lane after centuries when the history of Bangladesh will again be written or movies made by foreigners and locals, then the rightful heirs to their rightful places in history will stand out with the greatest

Bangali of all times, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the centre flanked by many.

Historians, critics, filmmakers, thinkers, intellectuals will have to again resort for information and evidences in the great archives of the world for newspapers, communiques, videos and books and the thousands of reports from reporters of all the major newspapers and magazines of the world who covered Bangladesh's pre and post independence period and those inquisitive minds will find a world of information on who was the man of the hour during

independence movement.

History is speaking correctly now and it will do so correctly down the centuries as Salaluddin and Gandhi's legacy could not be distorted nor could any body else's.

With affairs looking so encouraging now in the very near future this country of immense potential will truly become the Sonar Bangla of Rabindranath and the Bangabandhu. Let justice be done to the man and his men, the freedom fighters (the Mukti joddhas) who sacrificed so much for us to live with heads held high.

Abdus Salam is Director, Mother Language Lovers of the World, Vancouver.

## OPINION

## Resecularising Bangladesh

ABMS ZAHUR

thinking about lessening the prospect of living in Bangladesh.

In fact this act of Ershad regime dealt a serious blow to the great ideals of the war of liberation. Being a dictator Ershad never could think that such step might not really benefit the majority because the Muslims of Bangladesh, by and large, are secular in outlook. Some political analysts consider this amendment as an attempt by the dictator to make the common people believe that he is a devout Muslim to redeem his sinking image. His apparent zeal to repair mosques and to promote some sectarian leaders like "peer of Atroshi"

were aimed at increasing his acceptability to the people.

There may be considerable truth in the reports about atrocities committed by the BNP and the JI activists on the Hindus after the election of 2001 because(a) they suspected that Hindus cast their votes only for AL candidates,(b) scaring the Hindus out of Bangladesh would enable them to grab their property and to promote fundamentalism in the country to establish their hold more firmly on the poor, simple and illiterate rural mass. The militancy of the Islamic fundamentalists did not spare even other minority groups like Ahmadiyas, aborigines, Christians and Buddhists.

It has been revealed from various reports that a large number of Bangladeshis participated in the Afghan war against Russia. Being highly influenced by Afghanistan based cadres of Osama bin Laden the interaction between Ultra Islamic Bangladeshis and