

The amnesiacs



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MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

On the morning of the first day of *Baishakh* I called a dear friend of mine to wish him *Shubho Noboborso*. Physical distances have shrunk dramatically over the recent past -- we do not tire of talking about the global village -- and to be on the telephone in New York to talk to someone in Dhaka is now a cinch.

My friend, denizen of posh Gulshan, was in good mood. After the usual exchange of greetings I asked him how he was celebrating the Bangla New Year.

"We are getting ready to eat *pantha bhat* with *ilish maach*."

"That's great," I said, "Are you eating it from a *shaanki*?"

"What was that?" he raised his voice. The line was not very good. A few moments passed before he realized that I was talking of the large, humble, shallow earthen bowl that carries the name *shaanki*. It can still be found in the country and it can still lay claim to be the natural, if not the sole, purveyor of

pantha bhat.

"No, no," my friend laughed, "But we are using glass bowls shaped like a *shaanki*." Glass *shaanki*? The Bengali phrase *sonar pathor bati* flashed across my mind but I kept mum.

But I am straying. It was *pantha bhat* on *Pahela Baishakh* I had rather talk about. It was not my dear friend alone and his family who were eating and slurping *pantha bhat* on that day. So were thousands of others. The Bengali New Year is a truly magnificent day to celebrate. It warms the heart to see Bengali women, even little girls, hair decked with milk-white jasmine, gathering to celebrate the day with song and dance. To hear "Hey *Baishakh esho esho*" sung in unison is to take in the essence of the season.

But *pantha bhat*? I must not begrudge my fellow Bengalis indulging themselves in it once a year. Yet to eat *pantha bhat* with *ilish maach* in fake *shankis*, perhaps sitting around an expensive

dining table in an air-conditioned room, or under an electric fan whirling furiously, and feel oneself a *khanti Bangali*, is to be wholly amnesiac. *Pantha bhat* as a staple, and not a food for fun, has just about disappeared from the scene in Bengal. But not long ago, the toiling peasant, the weaver, the fisherman, and a host of others in rural Bengal, would start the day with a meal of *pantha bhat*. It was a humble breakfast for humble people. Today a reader of an English newspaper in Bangladesh may have to be told that *pantha bhat* is "rice soaked in water," as the writer of a news article in The Daily Star thought necessary to explain on *Pahela Baishakh*.

To the multitude, *pantha bhat* is still instantly recognizable without such assistance. More to the point, to many of them it is the leftover of rice eaten in the evening, perhaps still left in the earthen pot in which it was cooked, into which water is poured, the rice absorbing the water through the night, swelling

and turning softer and softer with the progress of time, while the people whose meal it is going to be in the morning sleep like logs after a day's back breaking work.

That leftover, incidentally, is not what would otherwise be wasted; people who eat the staple *pantha bhat* do not have food to waste. It is a quantity set aside for the purpose. In the morning the menfolk would rise, the women in the family would bring them the *pantha*, in earthen *shankis* or battered aluminium *thals*, the rice now fully bloated, about to break at the touch. The mass of the rice is now much larger than in its dry state. The rice, along with the additional water that is gulped down with the water-swelled rice, is singularly filling. It fills more space in the stomach than an equivalent amount of rice could ever do in its dry state. There is rarely any fish to go with it. More often than not, a large onion, a couple of hot green chillies and a dollop of salt are all that you need. And there you have *pantha bhat* that will sustain you till mid-day under the hot sun if you are working in the field, ploughing the soil perhaps -- I mean, not you, *pantha*-eating gentle folk celebrating *Pahela Baishakh*, but those peasants whose breakfast we have been talking about. *Pantha bhat*, given its high content of sodium and onions, we are told, also helps protect the tillers of the soil against

sun stroke, not a small extra benefit in a land of the scorching summer, the first day of which we celebrate.

To celebrate in luxury, even merely in comfort, what was and still is overwhelmingly a meal of the humble is to be oblivious of the reality of primal *pantha* and *pantha*-eaters I described above. Can amnesia be collective? I believe it can, just like ethos can only be national. A nation, like an individual, can be amnesiac. The collective eating of *pantha bhat* by the well to do on *Pahela Baishakh* suggests as much.

I must hasten to add though, before space runs out, that amnesia about *pantha bhat* is not the only one of its kind that befalls the Bengali nation from time to time. It just so happened that this was the month of *Baishakh*, the *Pahela Baishakh* celebrations were still not a distant memory, and I wanted to write about this kind of amnesia before I forgot all about it. I easily concede that amnesia abounds in other areas of our national existence. These may even be far more important than the one about *pantha bhat*.

Think, for example, how little time we as a nation took to forget about the ideals that spurred us in the struggle for independence. That was amnesia of the highest order. Or how quickly we had wiped from our memory the little joke (or lament, if you wish) that



used to go round in those days when we were still a part of Pakistan. It went like this: You see, as a nation we are very keen on democracy, but every time we start learning the ABCD of it, we run

straight into GHQ. We got over the amnesia in this particular genre only recently, and there is no guarantee that we will not slide into it again. I could go on elaborating on other areas of our collec-

tive amnesia, but have really run out of space.

Mahfuzur Rahman is a former United Nations economist and occasional contributor to The Daily Star.

'In 10 years Bangladesh will be where



I say we can and need to do this for Bangladesh. We need to give every citizen of this country the option of playing a part in nation building. Every citizen should "buy into" the goal and help promote it. And we don't need to wait for a figurehead to give us that. I embrace Prof. Yunus bestowing some "Grameen magic" on the rest of Bangladesh (and I hope we let him do it), but till that happens, let's all do our part and chip in.



rebuilding the nation is finding a common achievable goal (or two). This goal will be an idea/concept/reality that every citizen can aspire to and the leaders of the country can work towards.

Hokey as this may sound, it worked for a country like Singapore, and I ask: why can't it work for us? Singapore is a good example of how a solid goal and good tag line can unify the people and give purpose to everything a government does. It brings back national pride, and right now Bangladesh can do with some unified national pride. Let us not shed any more tears for the Begums or wait for the caretaker government or Prof. Muhammad Yunus to tell us what to do. Let us for a change tell them where we want the country to be in 10 years, what their task is in reaching this goal and what we as citizens can do to bring it there.

For the past three years I have been living in the island city state of Singapore. This city on the surface seems like the grown-up version of Disneyland. There is no garbage on the street, subways (MRT as it is known here) are clean and arrive

on time, everyone looks healthy and happy and of course we cannot buy chewing gum (actually a little secret -- one can buy it in the pharmacy section of the drug store after giving all your personal information -- including passport number and stating in writing that you are trying to quit smoking!). Despite all the fun poked at this country, I often marvel at the fact that this country was basically a swamp land in the 1960s and it is today wealthier than its former colonizer -- the United Kingdom.

Forty years ago when Singapore separated from Malaysia, it was a country that Lee Kuan Yew (founder and first prime minister of Singapore) said would be built on meritocracy and a "clean" government. It managed to do both and more. The government built the nation on its strategic location as a trading post, it focused on making itself the "hub" for several vital industries (e.g. aviation, financial institutions, bio technology) -- list of which evolved over the years. This "hub" concept was the main economic "goal" for the country.

My fascination with Singapore's success goes back to my university days. In the 1980s as an economics student, I remember studying about the "Asian Tigers" -- Thailand, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea over and over again. These economies were the darlings of IMF, and all the economics experts and institutions used them as the examples of what every emerging economy should

emulate. We studied the exponential growth of these economies from many different angles -- economic development, prudent fiscal policies, free trade, and the list goes. I of course have forgotten almost everything I learned back then.

However, I do remember one observation a professor of mine made when he visited Singapore in the early 1980s. He said he was astonished that every person he asked how the country was doing gave him the same answer: "By the turn of the century we will be where Switzerland is today." He said it was rather eerie (yes, to get the "unified" message across, the media here does a bit of brainwashing) that everyone gave him the same answer. Well, eerie as it may be, it worked. Two decades on, Singapore is where Switzerland is -- with a thriving private banking business and on its way to becoming one of the world's leading financial hubs.

I say we can and need to do this for Bangladesh. We need to give every citizen of this country the option of playing a part in nation building. Every citizen should "buy into" the goal and help promote it. And we don't need to wait for a figurehead to give us that. I embrace Prof. Yunus bestowing some "Grameen magic" on the rest of Bangladesh (and I hope we let him do it), but till that happens, let's all do our part and chip in.

So, for my part, here is what I believe Bangladesh will be in 10 years:

is today ...'

- Asia's new Economic Tiger.
- A country with 100% literacy rate.
- A country with double digit growth.
- The country with the highest number of new businesses every year.
- The IT hub for Asia.
- The most successful turn around story of this century.
- An exemplary democratic state.

The list will go on ... and feel free to add to it. I would expect our chosen leader to sift through it and pick one or two goals, and make them happen.

You will say: "Easier said than done" (our usual famous Bengali immediate negative reaction). I will say: we have to start somewhere and we need to have a goal to strive for. Now, it is the job of a charismatic leader to lead us through the treacherous path to get to the goal. As we have already seen, it will not be easy, but let us tell our future leader what we want and then give that person the support to make it happen. Let us be selfish and dream that we can make this country more than just the nation of strikes, political feuds and crises.

Thus, my request to our chosen, charismatic, action oriented, future leader: Stand up and lead us ... we are anxiously waiting ... because we want to begin the journey with you to take "Bangladesh where Singapore is today ..."

Durreen Shahnaz is a Managing Director for a regional media company based in Singapore.

We elect the leaders we deserve



In this context, then, this one and half year time is crucial for the CTG to prepare the country and its machinery so that we can stay on the right path even beyond 2008, and not revert to the same old hopeless situation. The public should be made aware of the fact that only voting cannot change their fate. Choosing the right person is the key.

MOHAMMAD ENAMUL HUQUE

THE honourable chief adviser has said that national elections would be held by the end of 2008, which is not too far away. Political activities will have to be started even sooner. With the proposed reforms in the election process in place, political activities will be regulated in a positive way to ensure a fair and free election that is still a mere dream in Bangladesh. The parties and their nominees will have to go through screening so that only competent, sincere and honest politicians can contest in the elections.

We know and believe that not all of our current politicians are dishonest or incompetent. Unfortunately, it is also true that a large number of them are incompetent and corrupt, and ignorant about the welfare of the people and the country as a whole. They take politics as a profession for getting rich quickly, and having evil influence over public offices. They betray the sacred responsibility of caring for the public property they are entrusted with, instead they treat them as their inherited personal property. They buy party nominations to get elected and make more money.

One can imagine that many of these corrupt politicians are happy at the chief adviser's announcement, because they now know their time is coming soon. Only a year and half! They can wait that long, this is nothing but a break for them! Musclemen and godfathers are gearing up in their hideouts! Their black-money and connections will buy party nominations once again! Once in the government, they can change or amend any law that restricts them from going to the same old business!

In the first example, only the budgetary cost of holding the rice price down is observable. In all likelihood this is only a small part of the loss. The major loss, which must be counted in terms of lost output, growth and the worsening income distribution, is not tangible. Worse still, these could be explained away or obfuscated by allusions to other plausible-seeming factors. This allows interested quarters to continue with the policy of distorting economic laws indefinitely, sometimes at enormous cost to the society.

Attempts to buck economic laws impose costs on the society as

person is the key. Party matters, but an incompetent, dishonest, rich candidate from a popular party does not deserve a vote over an honest candidate with proven ability, even though the latter may not be a member of the biggest party or as rich as the other.

Given that the vast majority of the people lack adequate education, and are living in the darkness of social misconceptions nourished by decades of misrule, this work is indeed a major undertaking. It is not only the government, but also every concerned citizen, which has to take the responsibility to let people know of their rights and responsibilities in an election, if we really want to succeed in the long run.

There was a visible tendency in the past in both the major parties to nominate only super-rich candidates, mainly to be able to buy votes. Party leaders cared little about their experience in politics or affiliation with party. The parties must get rid of that rotten practice, to give a chance to the most competent candidates. Excluding identified corrupt politicians by law is definitely a good way, but it should not be seen as the final way of getting rid of these infiltrators. They will come back in disguise, and new ones will grow, if the society fails to recognize them in time.

We need to change our attitude towards the social and moral values. Just a few decades back people used to be ashamed to show-off their illegally acquired wealth. A TV or a refrigerator purchased with black money or obtained by a bribe was explained to others as a gift from the in-laws. Recently, that practice has been washed away. People are not ashamed at all to show-off any more, they feel proud instead. Others do not care how a person gained his riches, instead they show respect to the rich. Family members and relatives are happy to see their kin making money, building house after house. They never ask about his sources of income. These practices must end. Otherwise, we will be back in the same dark endless hole, wondering how to get out of it. No one will be out there to help us again.

Mohammad Enamul Huque is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Economic laws



The strategy was to procure rice during harvest time at low prices, or import food grains from overseas, and then sell to favoured consumers at an artificially low price through a rationing system. It was possible to sustain the system for a very long time because the victims were farmers who did not have much political clout, while the beneficiaries, civil and military bureaucracy and urban people, wielded great influence on the government.

MOHAMMAD TASLIM

MOST of us are aware that the physical world we live in obeys certain immutable physical laws of nature that operate independently of our existence or consciousness. For example, friction between two bodies generates heat and light, and river water flows from higher to lower elevation. It is also known that these laws can be restrained or even reversed, but at some cost, sometimes enormous cost. It is possible to make river water flow from lower to higher altitude, but this would require a great engineering feat that can be achieved only at very substantial cost. What many people do not seem to be conscious of is that the economic world is also governed by some economic laws that

cannot be bent at will without cost.

An implication of the economic laws is that buyers will want to buy from the cheapest source while the sellers will want to sell at the highest price. Everyone will probably accept the justness of either the first or the second part of the statement, but there will not be many takers of both.

There is a time-worn demand of the consumers for holding down the prices of essential food items, in particular rice. The fortunes of governments ride on rice price. Successive governments responded to this popular demand by manipulating the market. The strategy was to procure rice during harvest time at low prices, or import food grains from overseas, and then sell to favoured consumers at an artificially low price through a rationing system. It was possible to

sustain the system for a very long time because the victims were farmers who did not have much political clout, while the beneficiaries, civil and military bureaucracy and urban people, wielded great influence on the government.

One of the costs of this market distortion was that there was a transfer of income from the poor farmers to more affluent town people. There was less incentive to increase agricultural production as profitability was reduced by the lower price. It is only recently that there has been an attempt to align domestic agricultural prices with international prices, much to the dislike of the beneficiaries. It is no mere coincidence that agricultural production has shown greater dynamism in recent years.

The government is the exclusive producer and importer of fertilisers (urea) in the country. Fertilisers are sold to dealers at a fraction of the international prices. There is a large gap between the domestic prices of fertilisers and the prices across the border. The inevitable result of the price distortion is that the sellers of fertilisers are reluctant to sell to domestic buyers at the subsidised prices; they are more

keen to sell to buyers across the border at much higher prices. The profitability of selling across the borders is high enough to encourage the sellers to take the risks of indulging in an overtly illegal act. The end result of the market distortion is that the farmers do not get adequate supply of fertilisers; crop output suffers as a result. The moral and social fabric of the society is tainted by the proliferation of illegal acts. The government has to incur substantial costs to prevent or minimise the occurrence of illegal trans-border transactions.

What makes the attempt to ignore economic laws so widespread is the ease with which the government can do it. It takes only the imposition of a tax (subsidy) on a product to force its price away from the free market price. Indeed, there is incentive for the government to impose a tax, as it profits from the additional tax revenue. The cost of the tax is dispersed among a large number of producers and consumers so that no serious resistance is mounted, and it goes unnoticed. Often the victims are also not aware of the costs they bear.

Attempts to buck economic laws impose costs on the society as

surely as attempts to bend physical laws do. However, there is an important difference. The costs of attempts to reverse physical laws are mostly tangible (except long term environmental damages) and can be estimated fairly accurately. The benefits of the outcome can also be established. However, the costs and benefits of attempts to buck economic laws are frequently not observable, and the beneficiaries and losers are not immediately identifiable. Hence, it is not easy to explain the consequences to ordinary people.

In the first example, only the budgetary cost of holding the rice price down is observable. In all likelihood this is only a small part of the loss. The major loss, which must be counted in terms of lost output, growth and the worsening income distribution, is not tangible. Worse still, these could be explained away or obfuscated by allusions to other plausible-seeming factors. This allows interested quarters to continue with the policy of distorting economic laws indefinitely, sometimes at enormous cost to the society.

The author is a Professor of Economics, University of Dhaka.