

May Day

SYED ASHRAF ALI

"We are summoning our forces  
From shipyard, shop and mill,  
Eight hours for work  
Eight hours for rest  
Eight hours for what we will."

THE above lines are excerpts from a song sung by the struggling workers of the United States, whose sacrifices the whole world commemorates today as the International Labour Day. The first of May is almost universally designated as May Day. Workers all over the world celebrate on this day their awakening to the imperative of solidarity and the struggle for a better life, and for freedom from oppression and exploitation. The holy Prophet Mohammed (SM) instructed all in unequivocal terms not only to give due recognition to the workers and labourers but also to ensure that the legitimate dues of a worker are paid even before the sweat on his brows dries up.

From the days of yore, saints and seers have reminded us over and over again that true honour lies in the pride of being able to do one's own job one's own self, that none has any right to despise the workers, that none is authorised to deprive labour, not only of dignity but of reward as well. "Two men I honour," says Thomas Carlyle, "and no third. First, the toil-worn craftsman that with its earth-made implements labouriously conquers the earth and makes it man's. Venerable to me is the hard hand; crooked, coarse... Venerable too is the rugged face, all weather-tanned, besouled, with its rude intelligence... Labour is life; from the inmost heart of the worker rises his God-given force, the sacred celestial life-essence breathed into him by

Almighty God."

Henry George, one of the earliest socialist writers in this discipline, laid down emphatically: "For as labour cannot produce without the use of land, the denial of the equal right to the use of land is necessarily denial of the right of labour to its own produce." When Carlyle and Henry George uttered these words few people had any thought for the labourer, and none regarded manual labour as particularly dignified. Well-to-do people, educated people, so-called gentlemen would not only look down upon the labourers but would avoid all contact with the toiler. To be able to get one's work done by others was counted as the most valued of gentlemanly privileges.

No wonder, Abraham Lincoln had to remind the Americans (and the people of other countries as well) that the limbs are given for use, to keep them idle is to abuse them, that honest work of all kinds is dignified and worthy of respect, that no stigma attaches to a man because he works with his hands rather than with his head. Abraham Lincoln, the giant among men, who worked his way from a log cabin to the White House, said: "If the Almighty had ever meant a set of men that should do all of the eating and none of the work. He would have made them with mouths only and no hands. And if He had meant another class to do all the work and no eating, He would have made them with hands only and no mouth."

But, in spite of the repeated sermons and eye-openers from the great men of light and learning, the world needed an unusually long period to rise to the occasion, grasp the true spirit and understand the dignity of labour, realise and appreciate the rights and

privileges of the hitherto down-trodden toiling masses.

Day in and day out, the worker was deprived of the fruits of his labour. He toiled that another might enjoy. He "slaved" that another might be rich. He was reduced to poverty and kept in chronic want to make continuous work necessary for him. He came to be despised because of his poverty, and with this his work also was despised. In course of time, work ceased to have any dignity, and it was the "idle rich" who earned social prestige at the cost of the poor workers' blood and toil, tears and sweat.

What the workers needed badly was the right to breathe freely and comfortably like other human beings. What they needed was the right to give vent to their own feelings with confidence and courage and conviction. What the eternal slaves of the factories and fields and workshops needed was a regulated and systematic working period, together with a good day to rest the hands and give the brain a chance to think about what had been and what was yet to be. He was, indeed, a lot harder up for a chance to rest the hands and use the head than the workers today. His work was tough, his hours were unusually long and sometimes almost unlimited, his pay was small. There was nothing, nothing at all in the world to fall back upon when he lost his job or fell ill or became too old to work.

Naturally, therefore, the workers the world over had no way out but to fight for their existence, an existence with dignity and honour, an existence with ensured rights and guaranteed facilities. This led to May Day which we celebrate today.

Workers all over the world celebrate, on May 1st, their awakening to the imperative of solidarity and unity and the struggle for a better life, and for freedom from oppression and exploitation. May Day is also one of the earlier international affirmation of workers' demand for an 8-hour day.

The inspired thought of introducing a holiday for the workers as a means of obtaining the 8-hour working day first originated in Australia. In 1856, the workers there resolved to call for one day of complete work stoppage; the day to be spent in meetings and entertainment instead -- as a demonstration for the eight-hour day. But it was the 21st of April, and not the 1st of May, which was designated as this holiday. In the beginning, the Australian workers thought of instituting such a holiday, but once, in the year 1856. But the first celebration made such a big impact, and great impression, on the toiling masses that it was decided to repeat the holiday annually.

Robert Owen, in 1883, appointed May 1 as the day for the commencement of the millenium, the commencement of Universal Happiness. But the first to follow the Australian workers were the workers in the United States of America. In 1884, a few labour leaders laid down their lives in Chicago on the 1st of May, in their struggle to establish the legitimate right of the workers.

The workers in the United States designated the 1st of May as the day of general work stoppage in 1886. On this day 2,00,000 workers left work and demanded the 8-hour day. The persecutions of higher authorities, however prevented the workers for a couple of years from repeating this demonstration, but in 1888 they renewed their

decision and designated the First May of 1890 as the next holiday.

The labour movement in other parts of world, specially in Europe, had in the meantime developed greatly. The world-wide upsurge found its highest expression through the First International Labour Congress held in Paris in 1889. Four hundred delegates from different parts of the world attended the Congress. It was the worker Leavigne from Bordeaux, the delegate from the French Trade Union, who moved a motion to give substance to the demand of the eight-hour day by a Universal Workers' Holiday in all countries. The attention of the delegates was drawn to the American worker's decision regarding the 1st of May, 1890. The Convention designated this particular date for international holiday.

By the moves of the motion it was originally intended that the workers should, by direct action, enforce a holiday on May 1, no matter what day of the week it might be. But even after this historic selection of May 1 as the International Labour Day, the Workers' Day of Unity and Solidarity, it needed a pretty long time to overcome the initial obstacles and hindrances. For example, May Day was first celebrated as Workers' Day in Britain in 1892.

Now that May Day has come once again, let us celebrate it in a befitting way, not through mere demonstrations and processions, but through a disciplined and systematic process to strengthen workers' unity and to ensure due protection of the right and privileges of the working class. Let us honour those martyrs who laid down their lives to champion the cause of the toiling masses. As long as the struggle of the



workers against the oppressors continue, May Day will continue to be the annual expression of the hopes and aspirations, the dreams and desires of the workers in fields and factories.

But even when the better times

shall dawn and all the legitimate demands of all the workers in every nook and corner of the world have been met with due sympathy and considerations, even then, in memory of the battles fought and the sufferings

endured, humanity will celebrate the historic May Day.

Syed Ashraf Ali, Former Director General Islamic Foundation Bangladesh

Buddha Purnima: It's significance and heritage



SUKOMAL BARUA

TODAY is the full moon of Vesakha, blessed by the birth (624 BC), enlightenment (589 BC) and Mahapariibbana (544 BC) of the Buddha. It is most the sacred and significant day for the Buddhist world. It brings peace, integrity, brotherhood and universal love and compassion for all sentient beings.

This sacred day is being observed as the United Nations Day of Vesakha, 2551, with due fervour and dignity. Bangladeshi Buddhists are observing the most sacred day in a religious manner, with honour and joy in our Monasteries.

According to the scriptures, "Buddha" actually means "an aware person," and was more of an adjective than a name in the beginning. Later,

Gotama, who was a real person, came to be called "Buddha" only after the realization of the truth of life.

What exactly was it that Buddha realized? Through his acute awareness he realized that "the world is full of sufferings." It was his discovery of the law of life, and it was the only true concept. The word "Buddha-hood" literally means "a level without burning," and is meant to mean "a level of calmness of the mind."

The Buddha defined four kinds of suffering, and described eight effects of suffering on humanity. The four kinds of pain or suffering generated by human existence in this world are: birth, old age, sickness and death.

The Buddha suggested several ways of overcoming the pain and suffering of life. He said that if we are aware of the inconsistency of life, and accept the non-existence of material things in the world, we can eliminate the addictions and desires from our everyday lives, and achieve true freedom through the sufferings in life.

Buddhism teaches that suffering can be banished by reaching Buddhahood. People can reach this stage by abolishing anger, temptation and ignorance about the truth of life. Buddhism is based on the belief in non-violence, peace, universal love and compassion.

The first sermon of the Buddha is: "Go ye Bhikkhus and wander forth for the gain of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the welfare of men. Proclaim O Bhikkhus the doctrine glorious, Preach ye a life of holiness, perfection and purification."

We all know that a glorious chapter

in human civilization began with Buddha in the sixth century B.C., in India. Confucius in China and Socrates in Greece were born in this century, and they brought about a radical change in the consciousness of mankind. Among them, Buddha, who became paramount by preaching a new and fully humanitarian religion known as Buddhism, also played the role of a great teacher.

From this stand-point, we proclaim that the Buddhist civilization is one of the most important of world civilizations. It is so vast that it spreads all over the world. It preaches humanity, universal love, fraternity, spirituality, equality, socialism, democracy, law and order and many other essential subjects, such as philosophy, logic, economics, medicine, astrology, arts and crafts, which are very important even for the modern world.

Besides, it teaches language, literature, culture, tradition, architecture, sculpture, art and archeology. In fine, it has a way to escape from all sufferings, by attaining Nirvana, the highest goal of Buddhism -- Nibbanam paramam sukham. It is needless to say that the Buddhist civilization is a part and parcel of world civilization and humanism.

From very early times, many unknown historical and archaeological ingredients of world civilization, religious castes and sects, are mixed with the soil of Babylon, Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Egypt, and with the civilization of Greece. In every country, civilization grew through a nation's culture and customs, and it was

destroyed for various reasons.

In the Indian subcontinent, through thousand of years, civilization grew, and was destroyed. Many archaeological finds, and monuments of many kings and dynasties are found all over the world. Religions, cultures and civilizations have developed, in this way.

Many monastic-cum- educational institutions were built by the Buddhist kings, and, as a result, the Indian subcontinent earned a reputation all over the world. These intuitions were centres of learning, meditation, literature, arts and crafts, social integrity, peace and harmony, and what not. So, they carried relics of the golden past.

The emergence of Buddhism more than 2551 ago was a revolution in the ancient Indian society, not only by its challenge to traditional caste-ridden institutions, age-old superstitions and prevalent philosophical concepts, but also by formulation of a new, rational creed close to what may be called the spirit of science and reason.

Down the centuries since then, Buddhism swept the whole of Asia like a flood and influenced the world at large; as a religion, philosophy, creed and way of life moulding a new culture and civilization. A new creative spirit in arts, architecture, sculpture, and literature and, in fact, the entire gamut of human endeavour, in every country of Asia was the outcome of the influence of Buddhism.

Buddhism today, like other great world religions, is part of the glorious heritage of mankind, and shines as an intellectually rational philosophy in the

contemporary world of science and technology.

Buddhism holds its keen appeal in contemporary times, when traditional religious values are being questioned in the intellectual scepticism of the times. A modern man is disillusioned with conventional ideas, blind faith, cults and dogmas, as much as he is immersed in scientific thoughts that have shattered many old myths and unveiled undiscovered mysteries of human existence. The progress of science and technology during the last two hundred years has opened new frontiers of human thoughts.

Buddha was a friend, because he had profound love for his disciples. He was a philosopher, because he thought for their welfare and indicated the path leading to happiness. He was also a guide, because he gave them guidance in order to enable them to achieve cherished goals through action.

Buddhism is a formal religion based on love and compassion for all living beings. As religion means human culture, so love and compassion for human beings is a particular phenomenon to deal with for all religions. In that, Buddhism has a human approach. So, it aims at individual perfection, leading to spiritual attainment and collective good for the society.

The whole history of mankind is a history of violence. But, history has proved that violence cannot destroy violence. On the other hand, violence invites greater violence. In the whole process of human advancement, the conqueror and the vanquished have

fought violently.

The conqueror has imposed his influence, while the vanquished has surrendered. But he has not psychologically accepted his own defeat. He prepares for revenge. If he cannot, a relationship of exploiter and exploited is given birth to.

Ideological conquest is much stronger than physical conquest. It is a matter of giving and taking through peaceful means. This is non-violence. Buddha preached this noble truth. Buddha uttered: "Nahi Berena Berani Sam Manthida Kudacanam, Aberana Ca Sammanthida eso dhamma Sanantana." Hatred cannot be stopped by hatred; it is stopped by non-violence.

The world of today is bound to seek refuge in Buddhism, no matter whether an individual is a formal Buddhist or not, whether he bows his head before the image of Buddha or not, whether he aspires after Nibbana or not, whether he desires an after life or not. His existence in this world is at stake. Non-violence proclaimed by Buddha constitutes the real solution for the survival of man.

The issue has achieved momentum, and the world's people are sparing no pains to mould public opinion in favour of peace and non-violence. Mere offerings and worship cannot save the world. The problem was not created by supernatural forces. It is a problem created by man. So, man must take the responsibility of solving it.

First of all, it is to be established who is law loving and who is peace

loving, whose activity hastens war and total destruction and whose activity prolongs the chance of war or finally stops war. The world cannot do without non-violence. All our endeavours and projects for harnessing the forces of nature will be nipped in the bud if non-violence is not followed. The Buddhists of the world are, today, at the most critical juncture of human history. It is high time for all of us to unite, to engage our strength for the propagation of the creed of non-violence. The world bodies, irrespective of colour, race, language and heritage, should make it a point that peace and peace alone is the slogan of man, and non-violence is the method.

It is high time for all of us to stand, to a man, against the apprehended world war. Buddha Bharat once illumined the world with the light of conscience, and today that conscience should be sharpened once again for motivating world opinion towards the path of peace, truth and universalism. There is no room for pessimism.

We, Buddhists all over the world, are always optimistic. We believe that enlightenment will dispel darkness. Let us we go forward on the spiritual journey with our human identity and clean mind.

Sabee Sattva Sukhita Hontu -- May all beings be happy.

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China-Japan: Cautious steps across the divide

WENRAN JIANG

CHINESE Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Japan was dubbed as an "ice-thawing" journey" by both Beijing and Tokyo. Likewise, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's China trip last October was called an "ice-breaking visit." Indeed, political relations between the Asian neighbors were icy throughout the 20th century.

But there have been positive developments since last fall, ranging from resumption of summit diplomacy to cooperation in energy conservation and combating climate change. The two countries now talk about forging a "strategic and mutually beneficial relationship" -- pushing their ties to a higher level.

Japan's economic recovery is also banking on the continuous "China boom," which led to Sino-Japanese trade volume ballooning to more than US \$200 billion last year, and China, combined with Hong Kong, overtaking the US as Japan's largest trading partner. However, Japan-China relations are still marked by the memory of

Japan's brutal invasion of China in the middle of last century, as well as strategic rivalry over territorial disputes and military modernization in recent years. Many questions remain on whether the two rising powers in East Asia can overcome their differences and move toward true reconciliation.

Under the leadership of former Japanese prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, from 2001 to 2005, Tokyo's political ties with Beijing deteriorated. The controversy surrounding Koizumi's insistence on annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, where war criminals are buried among the war dead, stirred nationalism in both countries.

Popular opinions toward the other turned more negative. A large-scale anti-Japanese demonstration, officially tolerated at the initial stage, occurred in Beijing, Shanghai and other major Chinese cities in the spring of 2005.

The angry outburst of Chinese youth toward what they perceived as Japan's whitewash of past aggressions sent shockwaves throughout Japan. Chinese President Hu Jintao reiterated

China's bottom line early last year: There would be no summit between the two countries as long as Japan's prime minister visited Yasukuni.

Under pressure to break the deadlock, Abe, on becoming prime minister last September, decided to change Koizumi's confrontational policies by immediately visiting China and South Korea. He made Beijing - rather than Washington, Japan's traditional ally - the destination of his first foreign visit as prime minister.

At first glance, Abe seems an unlikely candidate with whom Beijing would like to reestablish summit-level relations. Handpicked by Koizumi as his successor, Abe is a well-known conservative with hawkish views on foreign policy and history-related issues. But he promised to handle the Yasukuni issue "appropriately." In return, Chinese leaders only pressed the matter indirectly, indicating that they are willing to provide Abe with enough domestic space to maneuver.

For the moment, the two sides seem to have settled for a compro-

mise based on a "don't-ask-and-don't-tell" formula, allowing both to save face. Beijing announced that "the political obstacle in Sino-Japanese relations has been removed," while the Abe camp stated that the prime minister has not made promises one way or the other on the issue of the shrine.

To his credit, Abe proposed that Japan and China should establish a "strategic and mutually beneficial relationship." In explaining his initiative, Abe stressed energy conservation and environmental cooperation as the central theme of such a strategic approach: This will help China meet its environmental challenge, which will in turn benefit Japan.

Abe's new orientation on Japan-China relations has been well received by Beijing, and the two countries have moved quickly to mend ties. The two leaders met during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in November and a month later in Hanoi. During the second ASEAN-East Asia summit in January, Premier Wen met with Abe as well.

At the working levels, Japanese

and Chinese academics and experts have met twice to discuss history issues - a positive sign that both sides talk to each other on sensitive topics. Beijing and Tokyo held further meetings for strategic consultations, conducted new rounds of negotiations on the East China Sea dispute and closely coordinated on North Korea.

Parallel to these positive developments, given high praise by both sides, another set of movements is going on in Abe's new China policy. Domestically, Abe has put a high priority on changing Japan's constitution and promoting so-called patriotic content in Japan's education system.

He filled his cabinet and advisory circles with ultranationalists, and moved quickly to upgrade Japan's Self Defense Forces (SDF) from the status of an agency to that of a ministry, making the SDF one step closer to a full-fledged military machine. Internationally, Abe personally lobbied the EU countries not to lift the arms embargo on China during his trip to Europe in January.

Japan has intensified strategic

and military coordination with the US in the Asia Pacific region. The two militaries are further integrated in their command and control structure, in their consultations on logistical support in the case of a conflict over Taiwan, and in the speedy deployment of the missile-defense system. Abe has also been trying to form a US-Japan-Australia-India "democratic alliance."

What is the overall objective of these policy measures? It is straightforward, according to Abe's senior advisor Hisahiko Okazaki, former Japanese ambassador to Thailand and Saudi Arabia and an ultranationalist: A review of the current situation in East Asia "would make it clear that the balance of power will be between the U.S.-Japan alliance and China...China has to deal with this reality. We have to be prepared for war."

In response, Beijing has not so quietly flexed its own muscles lately to demonstrate that its peaceful-rise rhetoric should not be confused with the fact that China will not settle for third-rate power when it comes to issues of

national security and prestige. Last December, the People's Liberation Army revealed its newly developed J-10 advanced fighters in an unusual blaze of publicity.

In January, China successfully destroyed one of its own aged communications satellites, 15,000 km above the earth, with a ground-launched missile, demonstrating its precision-targeting capabilities. And there is much speculation that China is about to build its own aircraft-carrier battle groups.

Clearly, for Abe and Okazaki, balance of power is the supremacy of the US-Japan alliance in the Asia-Pacific region, while Beijing interprets it as the eventual equal distribution of power between China and its potential rivals.

But for now, Beijing and Tokyo have entered a new round of the "normalization process" after five years of interruptions. Wen's current trip to Japan, seven years after his predecessor Zhu Ronji made the journey in 2000, is promoted by both sides as a further step of a warming-up bilateral

relationship.

As the old Chinese saying goes, it takes more than one cold day for the river to freeze three feet deep. The obverse may be true with Wen's ice-melting efforts as many painful memories will arise in the course of the anniversaries this year.

This year marks the 35th anniversary of the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations, but it also marks the 70th anniversary of both Japan's full invasion of China and the Nanjing Massacre.

With both Tokyo and Beijing pursuing a two-prong approach with each other, the most challenging task for the leadership in both countries is how to prevent the hardline, worst-case-scenario and confrontational movement on either side from hijacking the bilateral agenda, putting the two giant neighbors on a road of collision rather than cooperation.

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