

The road to renewal

Bangladesh cannot afford to fall into unscrupulous hands again. For the unscrupulous rarely relinquish their hold. Let us remember Edmund Burke in this regard, that “those who have been once intoxicated with power, and have derived any kind of emolument from it, even though for but one year, can never willingly abandon it.”

SYED MAQSD JAMIL

NEWSPAPERS these days make interesting reading. The major staple is politics. There are disclosures galore. The political faithful are cutting loose and doing penance by making reformist proposals. Sharp verbal jousting is also going on about pedigree and the invulnerability of one's position.

One on the dock is showing defiance by recalling one's background as the scion of landlords while another is showing displeasure by disdainfully observing that a reincarnation would be needed for the reversal of fortune. It is clear that desperation is showing that the vitriolic exchanges are missing the mark.

There are two messages to be read from the times Bangladesh is passing through. One, the

country is where the drift of the past has brought it. Two, the general people want this drift to end, and expect that the task of the caretaker government is all about charting the road to renewal.

It is a fact that over the last so many years the country has been in a state of drift of varying degrees. Bangladesh is not unique in this regard. There are many other countries in the world that are in even greater misery. Nigeria, a far more resourceful country, has 70% of its population subsisting on \$ 1 a day. This is not to lessen the load of failure but to commend the awakening that the drift has to end and a renewal has to begin.

The drift was in the system, and the failure was in governance. Every regime abused the system and messed around with

governance. They either subverted or rode political democracy into constitutional power. It is here, in its political conduct and in the exercise of democracy, that Bangladesh drifted the most.

Political parties became temples for hero-worship. As a result, parties turned into legacies of personal domains. Naturally, the practice of democracy was the least important affair in the political parties. The leadership of the parties became autocratic in nature.

Politics in Bangladesh turned into servile courts of submission, and saw phenomenal rise of fawning neophytes.

The leaders, invoking the mantras of their patron saints, sat on the pedestal, while the rest conducted themselves like faithful devotees. One cannot sensibly think that any system could prosper in this kind of set up.

The rituals continued. It was the fear of erosion of dynastic authority that led to the 12th amendment, to invest all the powers in the prime minister, leaving the president a mere figurehead. Dissent was made blasphemy. Only the leader was given the authority to deem what was right and to scorn what was wrong.

It is a scenario where "duty shall have dread to speak when power to flattery bows." That is how a president, but few months elected, was hounded out of office.

The nation never came to know how Professor B. Chowdhury committed sacrilege, and what made the guillotine inevitable.

It was a lamentable case of abasement of the office of the head of state. The offices of the head of the caretaker government and the chief election commissioner met similar, ignominious fates. Every office descended into disrepute and declined in stature.

The political parties of Bangladesh rarely talk to each other, and whenever they talk it fails. The last time they worked

together was during the 12th amendment. They do not trust one another. This is rather strange when at the polls they seek the trust of the people to rule the country.

One may rightly ask why should the people trust those who do not trust one another? The vibes between the AL and the BNP chiefs are not good. The bigwigs in the two parties know it well, thinking "come not between the dragon and his wrath."

There never has been a successful dialogue between the two. Such an attitude, therefore, did not encourage democratic culture in the country. Had it happened, the national parliament would have developed into a strong national institution. It did not, and the national parliament limped on as an ineffectual chamber.

Every issue was taken out into the street, and the country was taken hostage in the fiercest manner.

There were gruesome killings by marauding AL foot soldiers, and torching of innocent bus passengers to death by AL youth firebrands. While fiendish ferocity was the forte of AL its

counterpart BNP schemed and crafted all sorts of election villainy.

It is natural that polls will generate heat and passion. It is the privilege to rule that the political parties and politicians seek. But the script for Bangladesh's election is typically its own, before and after the election. The nomination period becomes a brisk trading season for the political parties. Prospective and secure seats go to the largest bidder. In this way, a happy wedding of politics and business takes place.

Business tycoons and candidates from prosperous business houses buy nominations at a hefty price, to build greater clout and to acquire a mantle of invulnerability. After the polls are over the spoils belong to the victors, who then become soldiers of fortune.

A fair degree of patronage by the ruling party is seen for those from the opposition, particularly where it matters, as long as it brings the conciliation fees. Then comes the bickering over say in the parliament. The boycotts begin, and in a listless chamber

the ruling party legislators also become habitual absentees.

The cost of keeping a desolate chamber is passed on to the nation. Add to it the cost of the 65-member cabinet the outgoing government started with and maintained for a long time. The drift was of grossly callous nature.

The drift has cost Bangladesh excellence. The saddest part of this drift is that now, in Bangladesh, mediocrity wears the crown. Everywhere the standard has gone down. The soldiers of fortune have made almost every sector of national life their domain. Bangladesh is fortunate that it now knows where things went wrong. And it has the opportunity before it to chart the road to renewal.

The foremost asking is to make the parliament an effective body for all time to come. In matters of executive power, checks and balances will make it discreet. Indeed, the prime minister will head the government, but the office should not necessarily have powers to make the PM a sovereign.

The present effort should learn

from the perils of the past. The opposition may not be an active partner in governance, but it should be taken into confidence for constructive engagement. The integration should serve the national purpose.

On the other hand, the president should be the head of the state in the real sense of the term, and the office should exercise a respectable degree of executive power. Law, the Election Commission, and defence should be the prerogative of the highest office of the country.

Bangladesh cannot afford to fall into unscrupulous hands again. For the unscrupulous rarely relinquish their hold. Let us remember Edmund Burke in this regard, that "those who have been once intoxicated with power, and have derived any kind of emolument from it, even though for but one year, can never willingly abandon it."

Syed Maqsd JAMIL is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Rathajatra festival of Jagannath

The congregational chanting of the holy names of Jagannath sweeps the dirt accumulated on the mirror of the heart, and extinguishes the great forest-fire of worldly suffering. It sheds moonlight upon the lily of eternal good, it is the very life of knowledge at every step. It is full of the taste of nectar, it sweetens the ocean of divine bliss and, thus, engulfs the entire self. Jagannath is a dynamic personality. He moves. He dances. He loves. He plays on his eternal flute. He grows. He flows forth due to exuberance of joy and fullness of perfection. He expands, yet he is always new --"Nithya Natun."

PREM RANJAN DEV

THE Hindu festivals, fasts, rituals, pilgrimages, holy baths, and observance of sacred days are part and parcel of the great cultural heritage of Indian civilisation. They are of religious and social value, and sources of spiritual and moral enrichment. The Hindu festivals are more than what they appear to be. They are essentially a way of living and thinking in the course of existence and, as such, bring their rightness to bear on the individuals and society. The Hindu civilisation is an unending procession of festivals.

Rathajatra (chariot procession), one of the major natural festivals of Hindus, is celebrated in the month of Ashara (June-July). Rathajatra of Jagannath Deva at Puri is the source of all Rathajatra festivals in the sub-continent and other parts of the world. I shall discuss the dynamic spirituality and beauty of Jagannath Deva Rathajatra at Puri in India. There are, clearly, two principal modes of approach towards the supreme reality. One through pure jnana (knowledge), and the other through the purest bhakti (devotion). The path of

knowledge aims at trying to know the reality perfectly through identity with the supreme being, whereas devotion leads to dedicated service to the supreme reality.

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu can be regarded as the king in the realm of *Bhaktas*. He shines singly with his Achintya-Bhed-Abhed, diversity in unity and identity. Jagannath Deva is also a symbol of *Bhakti*, diversity in unity and identity. So, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu can be regarded as the king in the realm of *Bhaktas*, and *Bhakti* movement of Jagannath *Rathajatra*. Jagannath Deva is considered an incarnation of Lord Krisna. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, in his search for lord Krishna, almost ran towards Puri Dham from Shantipur. He started for Puri Dham to see the *Bigraha* (Idol) of lord Jagannath there so that, seeing him, he could quench his thirst arising out of Krishna-separation.

Only six of the closest Parishads (intimate companions) went with Mahaprabhu to Nilachal Shareekshetra. With his Gaudiya devotees, who arrived during lord Jagannath's Rathajatra, Mahaprabhu took part in all the festivities and sportive acts. He

participated with them to clean up the Gundicha, witnessed the Netro Utsav, saw the Pandra Bijaya, performed Holy Bathing, danced and sang in the procession before moving chariots, and participated in the water sports in the Indradumna tank and in the Narenda sarovar.

I shall try here to sketch briefly only a few of such festivities. Only once a year, lord Jagannath travels to Gundicha temple, riding his chariot during the grand chariot festival, and stays there for seven days only, then again returns to his main temple at Puri. The devotees' eyes were thirsty to see beloved Jagannath again. When proceeding before the chariots, singing and dancing, all the devotees who came from many places were divided into several parties. All parties sang the melodious Namkirtana, praising lord Krishna and describing His various sportive performances (lilas), and danced in sheer ecstasy.

At Nilachal, the devotees moved about freely singing Sankirtana and dancing on the streets of Puri. Day and night, Puri and its immediate surroundings were full of their Nama

Sankirtana. When they passed through any particular street, people living in that locality chanted "Hari Bole, Hari Bole." Their eyes were filled with tears of joy, their mouths were constantly chanting Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, their movements were graceful, their wide chests were covered with beautiful garlands hanging and swinging from their necks. At the time of lord Jagannath's Rathajatra, when Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra were on the chariot, the many Sanyasis started sweeping the street over which lord's chariot would pass.

The congregational chanting of the holy names of Jagannath sweeps the dirt accumulated on the mirror of the heart, and extinguishes the great forest-fire of worldly suffering. It sheds moonlight upon the lily of eternal good, it is the very life of knowledge at every step. It is full of the taste of nectar, it sweetens the ocean of divine bliss and, thus, engulfs the entire self. Jagannath is a dynamic personality. He moves. He dances. He loves. He plays on his eternal flute. He grows. He flows forth due to exuberance of joy and fullness of perfection. He expands, yet he is always new --"Nithya Natun."

A liberated man attains nearness to him, and becomes an eternal partner of his sporting activities, which are called "Lila."

Oh! lord Jagannath! lord of the Universe. I have no desire for wealth, having followers, or for beautiful poetry. All that I desire is that birth after birth I should have causeless devotion for you.

Oh! Son of Nature! I am your



eternal servant, but somehow I have fallen into an ocean of great suffering. Please be merciful and consider me as one of the specks of dust at your lotus feet.

Jagannath is infinite, unparalleled, completely whole. But the living being, or any other entity, is small, bounded and part of a whole. Jagannath is Full Bliss, Concentrated Bliss. A living entity is only a very small part of that Bliss.

Rathajatra festival of Jagannath is part of the

Vaishnava tradition, or the cult of *Bhakti*, which received an impetus after the advent of Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. This tradition attached no importance to the caste system, and allowed people of all castes -- from *Brahmins* to *Shudras* -- to sit and eat together. It was a departure from the orthodox culture. In the *Bhakti* dispensation, on the other hand, all castes as well as all men and women were treated as equal. It was this tradition of the

equality of all that was seen at its best in the festival of Jagannath.

The Hindu Community of Bangladesh will celebrate Rathajatra (Chariot festival) of Shree Shree Jagannath Dev in a befitting manner throughout the country. The main programmes will be held at Dhamrai, Dhaka, and Chittagong. These chariots will move with colorful processions. The Rathajatra will be followed by Ultorath festival, to be celebrated seven days after the chariot festival. Rathajatra is

festival of peace and friendship. It has turned into a celebration of equality against all sorts of injustice and inequality. The organizers of Rathajatra will distribute bananas, khoi and batasha during the Rathajatra procession. Kirtans will be rendered during the pulling of the chariot. May the blessing shower of supreme "Reality" fall upon all. Rathajatra greetings to you all.

Prem Ranjan Dev is President, Bangladesh National Hindu Council.

From boom to bust in 1920s America

Undoubtedly, the 1920s was a crucial period in American history. From “boom to bust” it hosted a mix of the affluent and the poor, and from it stemmed a distinctive social and cultural life. Though prosperity increased, the abundance of wealth created numerous problems, and itself was not a recipe for happiness, as the spectacular boom gave rise to the most spectacular crash. Despite the axiom: “we learn from history that men never learn anything from history”if any lessons for the present day can be learnt from the 1920s, that governments must formulate well-founded and ethically-driven fiscal policies that sustain economic growth, to prevent a repeat of the Great Depression.

PROMIT ANWAR

ALMOST inevitably, the unprecedented level of current global economic prosperity has been likened to the “Roaring Twenties” in America. Yet if the idiom “history repeats itself” is to be believed, future fortunes may be mixed.

Among both contemporary and modern historians, there is a common consensus that the middle and upper echelons of 1920s Americans evidenced a phase of substantial increment in wealth, resulting in an economic boom that is referred to as the “Age of Excess.” The culmination

of a web of causation incorporating factors, such as the post-war economy, strides in the industrial/manufacturing sector, and social attitudes as well as government fiscal policy, resulted in America being at the crux of the world economy.

Yet, the validity of Maldwyn Jones' description of 1920s USA as “An era of unparalleled prosperity” is subject to intellectual debate. Whilst tertiary sector industries profited, agro-based businesses noticeably declined. Social stereotypes and constitutional inequality rendered the “American Dream” impossible to be universally realised. Despite

the apparent economic growth, prevalent underlying weaknesses such as crime, poverty, and the influence of popular culture may have been detrimental in the long term.

Subsequent historiographic interpretations represent a full spectrum of views. On one hand, Paul Kennedy states “The USA seemed to have all the economic advantages which some other powers possessed in part, but none of their disadvantages,” thus enabling a “spirit of optimism that made investment and even greater prosperity possible.”

Conversely, Lewis Corey and John Chamberlain condemned

the country as revelling under “monopolistic capitalism,” which Lewis Mumford believed “represent the spiritual poverty of its inhabitants.” Hence, to reach a satisfactory conclusion, it is necessary to separate fact from fiction, and with the benefit of hindsight, objectively analyse the successes and failings of the true state of American society.

Affluence in America grew significantly in the post WWI yearsa statement best illustrated statistically by a rise in GNP: \$74bn to \$104.4bn from 1921-29. Contextualising this with the crippling effect of the Great War on European industry, their high interest loan repayments to the American government, and the deadly Spanish influenza outbreak, America capitalised on its own assets, enabling the Federal Reserve to extend its credit from \$45.3bn to \$73bn in this time. Weakening European industries created widespread scope for entrepreneurs to relocate in America, which became the

“Land of Opportunity.”

America seemed ideal for the entrepreneur due to its geographical location, size and ample natural resources: oil, natural gases, metals. Like today, thriving business became the centrepiece of American enterprise culture, with the Republican President Calvin Coolidge himself declaring: “The chief business of America is business,” and paving the way for the world's first billionaire, John D. Rockefeller. Increased materialistic comforts in American citizens' lives from 1920 to 1929 were facilitated by mass production of Ford cars, revolutionising the manufacturing sector, whilst clothing sales increasing by 427%, and the Empire State Building was constructed to epitomize the prosperous times.

Following a deregulated free-market model, occupation-related income rose sharply, unemployment fell to a record low of 3.2%, and real wages increased by 11% above inflation. Large-scale advertising created wants for the affluent American,

and promoters utilised new forms of mainstream media, such as the radio, to encourage Americans to spend their disposable income on new commodities. Moreover, with banks introducing hire-purchase schemes, the turnover of a multitude of industries rocketed, as did share prices, as novices began to “buy on the margin.” With high confidence in the bull market, it was felt nothing could go wrong.

The Republican presidents of the 1920s (Harding, Coolidge and Hoover) did not, however, forebode the consequences of their protectionist policies: foreign governments responded to the Fordney-McCumber and Hawley-Smoot tariffs with retaliatory taxes, which isolated America and closed doors that could have facilitated the establishment of free enterprise. The presidents adopted the laissez-faire policy of “rugged individualism”meaning little was done to eradicate poverty and prevent exploitation at the hands of corporations. In fact, 42% of citizens (6 million families) lived below the \$1,000 a year

bread-line, whilst the Brookings Survey (1929) revealed that 18 million lived in poverty, with 78% of the money generated from industry being distributed to the wealthiest 0.3% of the population. With limited social welfare, rifts amongst social classes deepened; the economic historian George Soule claimed that “the rich were getting richer and the poor were also getting richer, but at a much slower rate.”

Economists such as Roger Babson predicted an “inevitable” crash as the domestic market for luxury consumer goods became saturated, and unable to export products due to retaliatory tariffs, businesses witnessed losses of millions of dollars as ever-rising production created stockpiles of surplus. Unstable share prices forced businesses to make redundancies; the increase in unemployment foretelling the imminent economic catastrophe: recession. The share bubble of speculation burst by the latter stages of 1929, resulting in the Wall Street Crash on October

29th, ending the prosperity of the decade.

Undoubtedly, the 1920s was a crucial period in American history. From “boom to bust” it hosted a mix of the affluent and the poor, and from it stemmed a distinctive social and cultural life. Though prosperity increased, the abundance of wealth created numerous problems, and itself was not a recipe for happiness, as the spectacular boom gave rise to the most spectacular crash. Despite the axiom: “we learn from history that men never learn anything from history”if any lessons for the present day can be learnt from the 1920s, that governments must formulate well-founded and ethically-driven fiscal policies that sustain economic growth, to prevent a repeat of the Great Depression.

Promit Anwar is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.