

Janmastami -- the birth of Lord Krishna

GOUR GOPAL SAHA

IT has been specifically proclaimed in the "Bhagavad Gita" by Lord Krishna Himself that He descends to this mundane world at different ages whenever it becomes necessary for protecting the virtuous and the innocent from the atrocities and cruelties of the devilish and the oppressive, for establishing religion in its true glory and sublimity by eliminating the evil. Following this unequivocal celestial commitment, Lord Krishna, as the embodiment of Supreme Eternal Personality, descended to this planet earth on the eighth waning night in Bhadra during Rohini Nakshatra (asterism) posing as the worldly son of Devoki and Basudev. It is this enchanting descent of Lord Krishna to the earth that is celebrated as Janmastami by the Hindus the world over.

It is one of the most colourful and most widely observed religious festivals of the Hindus. On this blissful day, the Hindu devotees keep fast day and night and engage themselves in various festivities in praise of Lord Krishna. It centres round the supernatural birth of Supreme Godhead Lord Krishna in the prison cell of Demon King Kansa, where Devoki and Basudev, the would be mother and father of Lord Krishna on earth, had been thrown in captivity for a long period.

Devoki saw Him in his absolute Divine Glory, lovingly smiling and standing in front of her in His full youthful blossom. With the appearance of Lord Krishna witnessing divine power all around, the defence system of the highly fortified prison house of Kansa was shattered, locks opened automatically, and sentries went into deep sleep. Krishna consoled Devoki and Basudev that their

days of agony and sufferings would be over soon, and the days of King Kansa were numbered.

Devoki and Basudev, who are the staunchest devotees of Lord Vishnu, now incarnated as Lord Krishna, enjoyed the whole spectrum of the celestial sublimity happening before their eyes and were simply enthralled and fascinated. A celestial warning signaled to Kansa that the eighth issue of Devoki would be his destroyer and that added a new dimension to the full cup of agony of Kansa, who became mortally afraid of his ultimate doom.

Lord Krishna then instructed Basudev to take Him to Nandalaya at Gokula across the Jamuna, where Jasodha, wife of Nandaraj, had just given birth to a female child, to leave Him beside Jasodha and to take away the new born female child of Jasodha to be placed beside Devoki, to pass off as Devoki's female child.

An overawed and rewarded Basudev put Krishna on a basket and started for Nandalaya in the midst of incessant downpour and intermittent thunder-storm. For facilitating Krishna's journey from Mathura to Gokula the flooding Jamuna made easy passage for Basudev. Thus, Krishna descended in Mathura, and on the same night migrated to Gokula. The next morning Barajawasis came to Nanda's house to join the most joyous celebration of Krishna's birth.

From day one, everyday at Brajadhama (Brindavan) was of joyous celebration, and every moment was an experience of Krishna's ever new and ever-increasing love and affection that overflowed the hearts of the Brajabashis. As Krishna grew, everyone in Braja would find instances of Krishna's "Leela Madhuris," which instantly elicited the awe and inspiration of the devotees by reminding them of the

presence of Lord Krishna in their midst.

At the age of seven, Krishna did perform "Govardhan Leela" and "Maharasha." At ten Krishna left Brindavan for Mathura and annihilated demon King Kansa and made Ugransen the King of Mathura. Later, He went to Dwarka to avoid ceaseless conflicts with devil incarnate Jarasandha, settled there and married Rukmini, descendant of Moha Lakshmi on earth, and lived there till His ascension to Goloka (heaven) after the ordeals of the Kurukshetra War were over and His supreme mission on earth was fulfilled.

It was in the battle-field of Kurukshetra that Lord Krishna in His infinite mercy revealed Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna for the benefaction of mankind.

"Sonaton Dharma," or Hinduism as it is popularly known, cannot be traced to any specific starting point in history, and it does not have a founder, nor is it based on any particular scripture as the spiritual guide. The Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita, are no doubt, sacred texts of the Hindus, but the Hindus go beyond them in search of the Ultimate Truth. The Hindus believe that the entire cosmos is subject to the vicissitudes of time and, consequently, whatever has an origin at a point of time has an inevitable end. The process of creation (Shristi) and dissolution (Pralaya) of the Universe is a periodic cycle in which the entire Cosmos manifests at the time of creation and withdraws at the time of dissolution. The process continues till the liberation from the cycle of birth and death (salvation) is attained.

According to the Hindu belief this cycle of births and rebirths that all souls experience is called 'transmigration,' which results in re-incarnation. All souls, accord-



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ing to their Karmo, are destined to experience transmigration, except the Infinite, which is beyond creation or destruction. This Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality is spoken of as the indestructible, the Supreme Being, God, Almighty, etc. From this we get an idea of the question of the cycle of life and death, the nature of soul, the

Universe and its creation, the unity of the creation, and the reason for joy and sufferings, happiness and sorrow, and the ultimate understanding of man's relationship with God.

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Hindu philosophy and Lord Krishna

PREM RANJAN DEV

THE Hindu culture and tradition is not derived from any one prophet or founder. It has neither a uniform creed nor any organised church. Its history and prehistory are ageless. The Vedas, which are the scriptures of the Hindus, are unique in character. We find in the Vedas a great variety of subjects and a great flexibility of doctrines.

Another scripture of profound philosophic value is known as Bhagavad Gita, the song celestial, as it has been called. It forms a part of the great epic Mahabharata. The Gita attempted to bring about a synthesis of the existing Upanisads of the time.

This book has attracted the interest of the philosophers as much as have the aphorisms of the Vedanta. Almost all of the great Vedantists have some commentary on this little book of seven hundred stanzas. Besides Vedanta philosophy, there exist other systems of thought. These systems of thought are not in any sense in serious disagreement with the Vedanta.

An attempt has also been made to bring about a synthesis of all systems of thought by the Puranas. They are semi-philosophical works and there are eighteen of them, attributed by tradition to one person, Vyasa. The most outstanding of these Puranas is the Srimad Bhagavata, which itself is considered as a commentary of the Vedanta.

In this book have been fused all the great systems of Hindu philosophic thought with wonderful genius and skill. Those who are especially influenced by this book commonly go by the name Vaisnav.

Everybody knows that there is no single human authority accepted by all the Hindus, nor has there been any movement to create such a central authority. There is also no ecclesiastical or hierarchical binding authority in Hinduism. In spite of all

the above considerations, there is a definite body of knowledge and common themes that can be clearly identified as Hinduism.

The rhisis, or Vedic seers, function as a binding force. Authority resides in the rhisis, and there are several of them. Rather than vie for a complete monopoly on wisdom, these rhisis respect one another and work collaboratively.

Rhisihood in Hinduism is knowledge-based. This knowledge is progressive and dynamic, capable of continuous development. The rhis is can also cultivate supernatural faculties and are very important in Hindu tradition.

Festivals, ceremonies, and rituals are integrating and uniting forces in the Hindu tradition. Pilgrimages and temples play the same role. There is a huge literature of stories, mythologies and legends that affect the imaginative man. There is also integration at the conceptual level. At this level, many systems of philosophy are developed.

Again, there is no conflict over holding the single, universal truth. Rather, each system is recognised and respected by the others.

Hinduism encompasses the entire civilisation and way of life that has evolved since the dawn of human civilisation. The Vedas, the Upanishadas, and the Bhagavad-Gita play an important role in the development and practice of Hinduism. These ancient holy scriptures uphold the eternal truth of the existence of the supreme Lord and His incarnations, the latest being Sri Krishna. "Owing to the eternal will-to-communicate God descends on earth to re-unite His joyful Self with His created beings." Essentially, God manifests Himself in human form to crush and annihilate worldly vices and revive eternal values.

Lord Krishna has bound Himself to man, and that consists the greatest glory of human existence. He came

down with His full divine manifestations and raised human civilisation to a celestial plane. Thus came Sri Gauranga, and brought a heavenly unification of mankind irrespective of caste, creed, and race.

The Bhakti movement of that time, espousing whole hearted devotion to God in one aspect or another, opened up what was previously esoteric knowledge and practice for large numbers of people. Means were made available for everyone to realise God, with no conflict between knowledge and practice.

Sri Krishna focused on the philosophy of protection of good and annihilation of bad. His Gita is a deep reservoir of knowledge.

The meanings and intention of the Gita have historically found elaboration and explication. Sri Krishna attracts all beings towards Himself so that they may realise the depth of His infinite mercy and love. He maintains an existence of concrete bliss. The entity of the creatures of the cosmos is part and parcel of the Lord Creator.

Modern civilisation is now in a state of transition. If we are to survive, a moral and spiritual revolution should embrace the whole of the world. In this context, a penetrating thought and look into the totality of Lord Sri Krishna may help us much. The philosophy of Sri Krishna can contribute so much to our life and its fulfillment. Ancient Hindu wisdom continues to be a catalytic force in the transformation of the universe.

All gods and goddesses are in way renderings of Brahma. Krishna is the most perfect rendering of pure Brahma in the human experience. We can talk about Krishna, meditate on Krishna, love Krishna, and dedicate our lives to Him, and from that let us realise ultimate salvation and bliss from the Divinity.

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Priorities and challenges before the government

SHAMSUDDIN AHMED

THIS interim government must always remain focused on its primary task of holding a credible parliamentary election by the end of 2008. With this end in view it must set its priorities right and, at the same time, be prepared to face challenges as they unfold. A credible election in the context of the murky state of our politics means much more than just a free and fair election.

We have had, by and large, fairly free and fair parliamentary elections under interim governments during the last fifteen years. What have those elections given us except autocratic rule by the "Jatiyatabadi" and the "Awami" rulers, dysfunctional parliament, unbounded corruption, a wholesale loot and plunder of state wealth and property by the ruling coterie and their business associates, ignominy of our country being branded as the number one corrupt country in the world, a surge of crime and violence including Islamist militancy, unabated political agitations paralysing national economy and normal life, more poverty and more misfortunes for the ordinary teeming millions, and sprouting of a nouveau-riche class in the country?

In our country, unfortunately, politics has degenerated into a flourishing business of making

personal fortunes at the expense of state interest and the people's well-being. Money, muscle power and manipulation have come to define our brand of politics.

Here the most corrupt, the most sinister and dangerous, the deadliest of the rogues, the most unscrupulous, and the most dishonest materially and intellectually, are the ones likely to win hands down in any election.

Politics is no longer a glorious profession of serving the cause and interest of the country and the people. This trend of politics has to be reversed if we are to make this country a dreamland -- "Shonar Bangla" (Golden Bengal).

Priorities

A God sent opportunity has come our way to clear the dark clouds hovering over the political sky, and to hold a genuinely credible and meaningful parliamentary election, which will usher in a truly democratic system of governance in this country.

And for this to happen, the first priority is to have a voter list of all eligible voters, including Bangladeshi nationals living abroad, with photographs and thumb impressions.

This is a gigantic task, given the fact that we never had an authentic voter list for any election in the past. The Election Commission (EC) must work day and night to prepare a genuine

voter list as flawlessly as possible, and keep updating it as errors are brought to its notice.

Alongside the preparation of the voter list, the EC and the government must work hand in hand to bring about essential electoral reforms and put them in place before election is held.

Stringent laws need to be introduced to disqualify branded criminals and tainted politicians for election as members of parliament, no matter how high and mighty they are.

The doors of the august house of our parliament must be slammed permanently on those who have been convicted of, or have, charges of corruption and criminal offences and of misuse of power and authority pending in a court of law.

The bank loan defaulters, the religious bigots who are out to exploit religious sentiments of the people to get elected, and those who had collaborated with the Pakistan occupation army and opposed our liberation war and independence movement in 1971, must also be barred from the parliament.

Whatever leverage the political governments had in the past to influence the EC politically (budget allocation, control of funds, expenditure, EC secretariat under prime minister's office etc) must be removed and necessary laws enacted to make the EC

truly independent and powerful.

In this context, it is also essential to reform the very system of appointing the chief election commissioner (CEC) and election commissioners to make it more democratic and apolitical.

If it is not done now, the former CEC Aziz episode may plague the nation and create political turmoil again. It would also be appropriate to fix a ceiling for the total number of election commissioners, including CEC, considering financial constraints and reduced workload and low profile activities of the EC after parliamentary election has been held.

There is need to have necessary laws in place to control the mushroom growth of political parties and their conduct. Now, one can just put up a signboard and have a political party.

This must stop. A political party must be registered with the EC before it takes part in any election. A set of criteria for registration needs to be worked out in line with the practice in other democratic countries, including our next-door neighbour India.

A political party not holding regular party councils, not properly electing party office bearers at national level, not duly auditing party funds every year, failing to submit a copy of the detailed report of funds audited to EC each year etc., may face cancellation of its registration. This is a

democratic practice in many countries, but has been conveniently evaded by our politicians.

There is something known as a code of conduct of the political parties and the candidates contesting election. There is need to further improve upon it, with stipulation to disqualify a candidate on the spot should there be evidence of undue influence being exerted on the voters to vote for him or her and against his or her rival candidate.

The government and the EC must make concerted efforts to create a level playing field for all political parties, big or small, to field their candidates and contest the election. Let there be no "King's party" to be favoured, and no pariah party to be hounded out of the race.

It will be a laudable achievement of this government if it could set up a National Commission with eminent personalities like Dr. Kamal Hossain, Prof. Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, Prof. Rehman Sobhan, Prof. Mohammad Yunus etc. to review the existing system of constituting the apex bodies of various state institutions like the EC, the Public Service Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the University Grants Commission etc., and recommend a more democratic, rational and pragmatic system to guard these institutions against any attempt to politicise them in

future, and to enact new laws accordingly.

In the interest of the parliament functioning properly in future it would be worthwhile amending the relevant constitutional provisions suitably so that no member of parliament is absent from parliament, without the leave of parliament, for more than seven consecutive sitting days without forfeiture of his or her emoluments, allowances, and other perks and privileges for the duration of being so absent.

Most importantly, what the government must not lose sight of, and where it must not lower its guard, is the importance of completing the task of bringing to book the political big-wigs and the hoodlums who have pillaged and plundered this country all these years by masquerading as our rulers and leaders.

The government, in conjunction with the Anti Corruption Commission, must harness all the resources it can lay its hands on to collect all vital evidence of misuse of official power, authority and influence, and of all wrongdoings, and bring the culprits to justice.

The process of investigation and prosecution needs to be speeded up. Merely hauling them up and keeping them in detention will not serve any purpose. They must be brought to account for their misdeeds as speedily as

possible.

Challenges

The biggest challenge before the government is the mammoth array of forces representing various pressure groups, with the core leadership of AL and BNP in the vanguard, which are opposed to democracy and the rule of law.

These forces built over the years in the absence of true democracy have gained considerable clout. They are slowly and gradually raising their voices in a measured tone against the extended rule by this interim government, and against any form of involvement of the military.

They are opposed to any reform. They are even opposed to a voter list with photographs and thumb impressions. They want a quick return to either "Awami" or "Jatiyatabadi" rule for their own selfish interests.

They know for sure that once the political cleansing is done and the political garbage cleared, it is the AL and the BNP, which will bear the brunt, making way for a third political force to emerge. Hence, the surfeit of sympathy of staunch AL supporters for Khaleda Zia and that of BNP supporters for Sheikh Hasina. The government must not lower its guard.

The post-flood situation, requiring gigantic action plans to rehabilitate the flood affected families by helping them build their home-

steads, get food and medical care, buy live-stock, get seeds and fertilizer etc., represents a big challenge for the government.

There will be no dearth of people criticising the government for any lapses, and inciting unrest among the marginalised and the destitute.

The price spiral of essential food-stuff has been, and will remain, a challenge for the government, especially in the coming few months. Food importers and hoarders who control the wholesale market are largely responsible for the continuing price hike.

The government must ensure adequate stockpiling of essential food items. There is no room for complacency. Nothing will please the anti-democratic forces more than a famine-like situation obtaining in the country.

The legacy of power sector corruption and inefficiency left behind by the past political governments is another challenge for this government. The government will do well to be constantly seized with the problem, and embark upon short-term plans for augmenting power generation capacity in order to ensure that power shortage does not reach crisis proportion under any circumstances.

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Right to education

ALAMGIR KHAN

A popular slogan in Bangladesh's student politics has been Shiksha shujog noy, audhikar (Education is a right, not a privilege). The Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1924), Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Declaration of the Rights of the Child proclaimed by the UN (1959), United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and all other international declarations and covenants on rights of the child admit of children's right to education. The latest admission of this as a right is in the Dakar Forum on Education for All (EFA) and also Millennium Development Goals in 2000.

Article 17(a) of the constitution of the People's Republic of

Bangladesh also states that the state shall adopt effective measures for "establishing a uniform mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law." Again, Article 19(1) says: "The state shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens;" this surely means opportunity of education too.

But there are pits of confusion to fall into when you know that it is included as one of the fundamental principles of the state policy in Part II of the constitution, which consists of generalised principles and broader visions for running the state, and according to Article 8 (2), which "shall not be judicially enforceable."

However, there is no need for the childish thinking that

the rights admitted thus far as fundamental in the constitution, that are free from this bar of judicial unenforceability," are all sincerely met by the state. Yet, making education a fundamental right could boost the translating of the right into reality, no doubt.

Against this policy backdrop, where does our children's right to education stand? One estimate says that there are 37 lakh, that is 1 out of every 5 primary school age children, who are still out of school in Bangladesh.

Children who belong to poor households, remote rural areas, urban slums, coastal belts, char lands, marginal and excluded communities, and tribal people are the most deprived ones. Many plans and projects have been taken to address the needs of these children. But the reality is as bleak as ever.

The second Primary Education Development Program (PEDP-II) of Taka5000 crore, an umbrella programme intended to strengthen mainstream education, has recently adopted an approach of inclusive education to meet the needs of these excluded groups and communities.

But half-way through the programme's lifespan (2003-2009), inclusive education is still in the larva phase keeping all those children languishing in the prison of illiteracy, and no one knows when it will metamorphose into reality. This has led Ms Rasheda K. Chowdhury, Director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), to be critical of PEDP-II in her speech at a seminar in Dhaka on the state of education right for

indigenous children, who said that PEDP-II talks of inclusive education but itself is not inclusive in that it has left a large number of children who are not in the mainstream education out in the cold.

Besides, there are the Reaching Out of School Children (ROSC) Project, Basic Education for Hard to Reach Urban Working Children (BEHTRUWC) project, and many other big and small initiatives to bring out-of-school children within the network of education. Many projects and programmes were, have been, and are being, taken at policy level, but the juice of benefits does not trickle down to the ground. WHY?

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