

Upazila chairmen's desperate call for empowerment

Make them functional in the real sense

AFTER subjecting elected upazila parishads to a roller-coaster ride virtually turning these powerless, thanks to MPs' extending control over them and the UNOs' defiant streak, the prime minister now announces that her government will delineate responsibilities of MPs, upazila chairmen and UNOs. For months together, there have been amendments to laws through cabinet discussions and parliamentary proceedings and issuance of circulars and different notifications apart from public positionings whereby the powers and functions of the upazila chairmen and vice-chairmen were effectively curtailed. It involved grant of mandatory advisory role to the MPs over the upazilas.

Yet, when in the case of municipalities or pourashavas, the MP's advisory role was withdrawn, one had expected that the same principle will apply to the upazila parishads too. This hasn't happened. Now, one has to wait and see if the prime minister's promised redefining of the role will entail this change also.

One cannot but sit up and take note of the fact that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has, after 14 months of being in power, now says in a meeting with upazila chairmen that the government will rethink, redefine and clearly delineate the responsibilities between the MPs, upazila chairmen and the UNOs. Could she not come up with a changed reform text to chime in with the occasion? What could be more appropriate for her to unveil a concrete plan of action at the workshop delineating powers and functions between the two sets of important elected representatives with a view to leaving the MPs with their constitutionally designated role and investing the elected upazila chairmen with powers to operate autonomously towards strengthening the upazila system as a cornerstone of participatory democracy?

The prime minister has just voiced an intent for change but she has not given any time-line for it -- for instance, when will the delineation of authority be announced, how long will it take to implement this and through what mechanism will the changes be brought about? This is a serious matter of fundamental nature having to do with constitutional and elected bodies. Already a long time has elapsed through messing up of the traditional equations between the MPs, upazila chairmen and UNOs which have been substantially unsettled. Seeds of conflict have been bred between two sets of elected public representatives with bureaucrats setting sails accordingly. This is a far cry from the electorate's expectation who want all components of the government working in a healthy ambience of cooperation, mutual trust and dedication.

Unless, these fundamentals are ensured nothing worthwhile can be achieved by gifting duty-free pajero jeeps, improving perks and prerogatives that have nothing to do with the actual exercise of power for the good of the people.

Shubho Nabo Barsha!

The occasion for a renewal of national spirit

THE advent of Pahela Baishakh is yet again a time for celebration, for a renewal of the national spirit as it were. It is so because it is a reminder of the heritage that Bengalis are as a people heir to in this part of the world. It is doubly reassuring to know that Baishakh comes at a time when other people in South Asia as well as in the region just outside it also happen to be welcoming or preparing to welcome their own new year. In other words, when we observe the arrival of the Bangla shaal on the first day of Baishakh, we are in a way identifying with others across a wide swathe of geography of which, naturally, we are an important component.

Where a specific celebration of the Bengali New Year is concerned, there is about it that certain acknowledgement and reminder of the cultural mores and customs which have shaped our responses to the world around us. It is, as we have noted through historical times, that moment when a new haal khata is opened or, in simple terms, a new haal of accounts is inaugurated. It is that season when new crops determine the course of new times. That sounds simple enough. And yet within that simple format that shapes a new year comes a host of factors primordial and pre-eminent in the shaping of our social history as a people. Indeed, over the years, Pahela Baishakh has somehow meshed in with our perception of ourselves as a nation with its own political background built upon a distinctive social premise. It is a reality that can be observed through the celebrations that will burst upon the country -- in its villages and towns -- in myriad forms and in a multiplicity of colours. All of these will come encompassed in Baishakhi melas or festivals. Baishakh for Bengalis is a celebration of life through poetry, music and a pure, happy surrender to the heritage forged by their ancestors.

Let Pahela Baishakh this year be one more step in our journey towards individual progress and collective accomplishment. Let it be a renewal of the national soul through imbuing in us thoughts of the well-being of all our fellow citizens. Let the songs we sing this morning translate into a resounding celebration of the country and all that it stands for.

Our Baishakh dreams and prayers

Baishakh is a good deal more than a simple beginning of a new year. It is, indeed, a paean to heritage, a highlighting of the cultural traditions we are heir to. Baishakh is a harkening back to the past in as much as it is a comprehension of the present and a prediction of the future.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

LET there be a celebration of the Bengali spirit today. It is a spirit that has done us well through the centuries. Baishakh is a good deal more than a simple beginning of a new year. It is, indeed, a paean to heritage, a highlighting of the cultural traditions we are heir to. Baishakh is a harkening back to the past in as much as it is a comprehension of the present and a prediction of the future.

If the past was our beginning, through inaugurating a new season of mists and mellow fruitfulness and that in a gathering of nature's fresh offering sprouting from Bengal's soil, the present is that moving moment in time when we come of age, with every fair breeze that blows by. The future will be what we make of it, conceived as it will be in the dreams we shape about the place of this people's republic in the global scheme of things.

This morning, on yet another inaugural day of Baishakh, our dreams get the better of the banalities we live through. Those dreams come in association with the prayers we have on offer, before the Lord of the Universe, outpourings of the heart that keep us riveted to the thought that the land is as much ours as we are the land's.

Our dreams come wrapped in the glory of our attainments of the past. They zoom in on the soul, on the endless songs it has sung of a Golden Bengal someday coming to truly define our collective being as a nation. That people will have enough to eat, that they will have cause for mirth and laughter, that they will sing of the joys of being alive is a thought we push forth a little more this morning.

It is a thought passed on to us by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, by the brave men who steered the nation to freedom under the banner of the Mujibnagar government, by the three million Bengalis, our own, who bit the dust in order for us to reach out for the stars. That is the essence of our dreams. And yet

there is more.

On Pahela Baishakh, we dare to dream of old injustices crumbling away through bringing all those aging collaborators of the Pakistan occupation army before the law, the better to let the world know that as good people, as citizens of a poor but self-respecting country, we do not let ancient dishonour ride roughshod over us. We do not forget; and we will not forgive before we have the guilty do penance for the crime of committing outrage against their own people.

And there are other dreams. We dream of a society where secular politics will be the governing principle of this land. That this is a nation of Bengalis of all religious beliefs and persuasions, that it is Bengali nationalism we will uphold despite the predatory instincts of men only too ready to go tribal, is a dream we pursue on the steamy streets and in the quiet villages of this country. We go on dreaming... of the indigenous people of Bangladesh, of its original inhabitants, being able to live a life to their satisfaction.

That no one not from their timeless expanse of geography will terrorise them any more, that no one will be audacious enough to burn down their huts and turn them into frightened refugees in the land of their ancestors, that their young will not be shot as they defend their honour and their heritage, that their children will unleash their imagination in the language of their fathers is a dream we weave in the arbour of our hearts this morning.

And we pray that the remnants of darkness will flee on the dawn of our shaping of dreams. We pray that those who have corrupted themselves through unmitigated exploitation of national resources will not return to commandeer high office again. We pray that the men, in politics and in academia, who have in the past mutilated the history of Bangladesh will no more emerge on to the highway to make a mess of our lives again.

Our prayers are for a redemption of the



Chasing the dream!

old spirit... that there will arise in this country of poetry and struggle leaders who have the stature and the intellectual accomplishment to lead us out of the woods and into a gleaming valley of justified hubris brought on by our collective pride in a coruscating past.

Our prayers reach up to the heavens this morning, for they relate to what we mean to do below on the portion of earth we inhabit as Bengalis. That we will build on the aspirations of our parents' generation, that we will pass the torch, glowing in good cheer, on to our children in order for them to pass it on to their children is a prayer that flows from our souls on this new day of a new year.

On Pahela Baishakh, we dream of a twinkling city on the hill that will speak to us of the fulfillment of the dreams which Rabindranath Tagore shaped along the banks of the Jamuna, which Kazi Nazrul Islam forged in the intensity of dark misery, which Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman held aloft through blood and fire and human endurance down the winding passages of our journey into nationhood over time. We dream of happiness in starlight. We pray, for stars to dot the firmament of our expectations.

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A gala day for Bengalees



It is an irony of fate that a few orthodox Muslims in our country, shrouded in ignorance, look down upon this Pahela Baishakh festival simply because they mistakenly consider it to be a festival of non-Muslim origin.

KAZI LIAKAT HOSSAIN

EVERYTHING under the sun looks gay and cheerful and colourful. As we celebrate Pahela Baishakh we remember that the Babylonians were in fact the first observers of New Year about 4,000 years ago. Celebration of the new year is the oldest of all holidays.

There is little doubt that the Bangla calendar that we follow today was introduced by the Muslims in this subcontinent. What is popularly known as Bangla Saal today saw the light of day through an ordinance promulgated by Akbar the Great, the renowned grandson of Zahiruddin Mohammad Babar, whose mother and father were descendants of Chengis Khan, a great Mongolian warrior, and Taimurlong respectively.

Since the month of Moharram coincided with the Bengalee month of Baishakh in

963 A.H., the month of Baishakh in Bengal was made the first month of the Bengalee Era instead of the month of Chaitra, which was the first month of the Shaka Era in the then Bengal.

It is an irony of fate that a few orthodox Muslims in our country, shrouded in ignorance, look down upon this Pahela Baishakh festival simply because they mistakenly consider it to be a festival of non-Muslim origin. The months of the new Bengalee Era (or Tarikhe-Elahi) were initially called Karwadini, Ardi, Vihisa, Khordad, Teer, Amardad, Shariar, Aban, Azar, Dai, Baham and Iskander.

Nobody knows for sure how and when we started calling the months Baishakh, Jaishtha, etc. It is presumed that those months, based on the names of stars, were derived from the Shakabda, which was introduced in 78 AD to commemorate the reign of the Shaka dynasty in this subcontinent. The star based names of the

months were called Baishakh from the star known as Baishakha, Jaishtha from Jaishthaya, Ashar from Shar, Sraban from Srabani, Bhadra from Bhadrpadada, Ashwin from Ashwani, Kartik from Kartika, Agrahyan from Agraihan, Poush from Poushya, Magh from Magha, Falgun from Falguni and Chaitra from Chitra.

The celebration of Nabarsha, or Pahela Baishakh (first day of Baishakh), was introduced by Emperor Akbar the Great. The whole process started sometime in the 6th century but drew special attention when the Mughal Emperor Akbar started the Bengalee calendar year on March 10, 1585 on the advice of some of his courtiers. However, Baishakh as the first month of the Bengalee calendar came into effect from March 16, 1586 -- the day Akbar ascended the throne.

Later, this concept of the Bengalee year quickly spread throughout the Mughal Empire, particularly in the rural areas of Bengal. Bengalee peasants also used Baishakh as the month to start cultivation, and fields were generally ploughed during the period mid-April to mid-May.

It is a period of the year which heralds the arrival of summer, with severe dust-storms, dark skies in the northwest and violent "nor-westers." I have always taken this period as a symbol of reawakening. It is as if nature takes her broom and cleans all

the dirt and filth from the environment. One feels the change in the air. There is heat, humidity, fierce storms, rain and then freshness all around us. Pahela Baishakh has now evolved its own cultural connotations. On that day businessmen, particularly in the villages and mostly within the Hindu community, open special ledger books (haal khata). In Munshigonj, Bikrampur, it is called "Gadi Shaeed," which is bound in red cloth and used for maintaining accounts. The whole process is called initiating the haal khata.

On that day, customers are offered sweets, rich food is cooked in every house. Pahela Baishakh is also associated with melas in some rural areas, particularly in Bikrampur. It is called goloya (fair), filled with local agricultural products, potteries, handicrafts, masks, kites, balloons, toys, flutes and whistles of all kinds for the children. Nearly two hundred and fifty fairs are organised throughout Bangladesh. Either on the first day of Baishakh or in its first week many urban centres, including Dhaka, the holding of book fairs and exchange of books as gifts, particularly books of poetry, mark the day.

This reflects the sentimental aspect of the Bengalee psyche. In the last few years younger people, particularly students, initiated the vogue of exchanging greeting cards, gifts, flowers and sweets. What a lovely way to start the year. In recent times, there has also been the revival of fun-parades, more on the lines of what is normally done in carnivals abroad. This parade is normally organised by students of the (IFA) Institute of Fine Arts of Dhaka University. It is led by mask-wearing participants and thousands of people, some carrying small children on their shoulders, join in this gala festival. Most women put on red and white saris, which have become a kind of new year symbol, and wear garlands of flowers. Many have their faces painted. Men wear pajamas and kurtas, which has also become a universal new year dress for men.

Despite the stormy aspect of the season, we Bengalees cheerfully look forward to welcoming the first day of Baishakh this year, as in earlier years. Pahela Baishakh happens to be unique in that it is participated in by all.

In Bangladesh, the Bangla new year is celebrated on April 14. In Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, people celebrate their new year around the same time. It is interesting that their new year festivities too coincide with April.

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