

Pahela Baishakh this year

A positively revealing observance

THE spontaneity with which the nation observed Pahela Baishakh on Thursday has revealed certain significant aspects about society in Bangladesh today. One is of course the remarkable growth in the numbers of people for whom the advent of the Bengali New Year is not only cause for a day's celebration and holiday but also a rededication to the traditions which for have ages nurtured Bengali culture in Bangladesh as well as beyond its frontiers. One notes that Pahela Baishakh is today much more than a Dhaka- or urban-based affair, for as this year's spirited observance of the day has so amply demonstrated, its celebrations have greatly diversified and are now as much a matter of rural exuberance as they are of the urban.

The economic aspects of Pahela Baishakh cannot be ignored. It is comforting to know that while the origins of Baishakh, rooted in early Mughal times, revolved around a closing of old accounts and an opening of new ones, in today's circumstances it is again economics which underpins the coming of Baishakh. The brisk trading which went on in the days and weeks preceding Pahela Baishakh is a testimony to the near religious fervour, not unlike that associated with Eid, with which people approached the New Year. On a wider scale, Pahela Baishakh this year was a resounding reassertion of the secular ethos of this nation. All Bengalis, among whom come followers of all faiths in the country, made it a point to remind themselves of the cultural stock they spring from. In addition, celebrations of the New Year by indigenous people, Bangladesh's original inhabitants, only added substance to the secular spirit.

Pahela Baishakh this year can, in that particular way, be regarded as a coming of age for the people of Bangladesh. And for the majority of Bengalis who also happen to be followers of the Islamic faith, a celebration of national culture has nothing contradictory with their adherence to faith (despite the attempts of the fanatical right to mislead people on this point). That Bangladesh's people are justifiably proud of their cultural heritage and aware of their religious values has never been in doubt. On Thursday, we as a people firmly renewed our faith in ourselves.

No let-up in land grabbing

Impunity feeds this crime on

ALLEGATIONS of land grabbing continue to pour in from all over the country. In addition to foreshores, water bodies and arable lands the malady is now spreading into graveyards and cremation grounds.

In Chittagong, a housing company is said to have grabbed nearly one acre cremation ground and a large portion of a temple over the last two years. The company is also forcibly purchasing arable lands for its housing project without approval from the Chittagong Development Authority (CDA). The CDA conveyed its disapproval to the company saying that the lands were arable. In spite of that the company continues to sell plots on such farm lands.

Land grabbing and the haughty denial of the grabbers of any wrongdoing continue unabated. Interestingly, grabbers continue poaching spaces and the authorities concerned issue orders to stop the crime. Then there is no follow-up. And when the authority intervenes it comes too late in the day by which time companies establish some sort of claim over the lands.

It is evident that the government is helpless in the face of their incorrigible defiance of law and let them get away with whatever they do. In most cases they are in collusion with officials in committing such crimes.

In recent past, there were reports of clearing parts of hills in Chittagong for housing projects, which led to heavy mudslide and loss of lives in the region.

We call upon the authorities, not only in Chittagong and Dhaka, but all over the country, to show zero tolerance and take stern measures against the realtors to stop this land piracy. They not only cause huge ecological imbalance and loss of valuable lands but also deprive thousands of people

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 17

1397

Geoffrey Chaucer tells the Canterbury Tales for the first time at the court of Richard II. Chaucer scholars have also identified this date (in 1387) the start of the book's pilgrimage to Canterbury.

1861

American Civil War: Virginia secedes from the United States.

1864

American Civil War: The Battle of Plymouth begins Confederate forces attack Plymouth, North Carolina.

1941

World War II: The Kingdom of Yugoslavia surrenders to Germany.

1946

Syria obtains its Independence from the French occupation.

1961

Bay of Pigs Invasion: A group of CIA financed and trained Cuban refugees lands at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba with the aim of ousting Fidel Castro.

1971

The People's Republic of Bangladesh forms, under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Mujibnagar.

1971

The Mujibnagar government officially takes charge of the War of Liberation, with Syed Nazrul Islam as Acting President and Tajuddin Ahmed as Prime Minister.

1975

The Cambodian Civil War ends. The Khmer Rouge captures the capital Phnom Penh and Cambodian government forces surrender.

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

The 2010 report is the 35th of the kind and covers 194 countries. The 7,000-page document contains 2 million words and has a section on practices in Bangladesh.

The Report is not very complimentary about the situation here. It is a mini compendium of violations taking place under several categories. The US State Department has a set of categories under which it sifts information from several sources in a country to produce the Report.

The first category is: Respect for the integrity of the person, including freedom from (i) arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life, (ii) disappearances, and (iii) torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

The second category deals with prison and detention centre conditions, arbitrary arrest or detention, role of police and security apparatus, arrest procedures and treatment while in detention, denial of fair public trial, trial procedures, political prisoners and detainees. Civil judicial procedures and remedies and arbitrary interference with privacy, family and home also come within this category

The third category focuses on respect for civil liberties, including (i) freedom of speech and press, internet freedom, academic freedom and cultural events, (ii) freedom of peaceful assembly and association, (iii) freedom of religion, and (iv) freedom of movement, internally displaced persons, protection of refugees and stateless persons, elections and political participation.

The fourth category refers to official corruption and government transparency. The fifth category deals with gov-

ET again last week, the US State Department released its annual country Report on Human Right Practices around the world.

ernment attitude regarding international and non-governmental investigation of alleged violation of human rights.

The sixth category is concerned with discrimination, societal abuses and trafficking in persons, which includes women and children. There are special dockets for abuse of persons with disabilities, indigenous people, etc.

A separate category deals with workers' rights and includes their (i) right of association, (ii) the right to organise and bargain collectively, (iii) prohibition of forced and compulsory labour, (iv) prohibition of child labour and minimum age of employment, and (v) acceptable condition of work, etc.

We have listed all the categories just

Our national ethos demands scintillating standards on human rights. It has been encoded in the Bangladesh Constitution. Strict adherence to these standards is what is now expected.

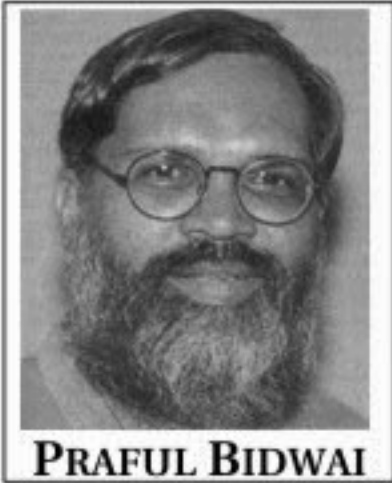
to show that the Report is quite detailed and tries to cover major areas of concern on human rights practices in a country.

The Bangladesh section of the Report is usually compiled by US diplomats posted in Dhaka. They pick up source material from the local media and press. They also rely on narratives of NGO's. Regrettably the Bangladesh government or its agencies are not quoted to know the other side of the story, if any. Hence, many consider the Report to be partial or faulted.

The origin of collating such information on human rights of each country began in the 1970s when US Congressman Fraser and Congressman Harkin introduced legislation with the purpose of linking human rights to aid. They asked the secretary of state (foreign minister) to use the US embassies to collect information on human rights conditions on each of these countries.

The annual Report usually comes

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

crats-diplomats S.P. Shukla and Nirupam Sen, retired Navy chief L. Ramdas, writers Arundhati Roy and Nayantara Sahgal, scientists M.V. Ramana and P.M. Bhargava, artists Krishen Khanna and Vivan Sundaram, and former vice-chancellors Mushirul Hasan and Deepak Nayyar, have in common?

The answer is, concern about the safety of nuclear power, highlighted by the still-unfolding disaster at Fukushima in Japan. This impelled these eminent individuals to sign a statement demanding a thorough, independent review of India's nuclear power programme, and pending it, a moratorium on further nuclear projects.

The statement (available at cndpindia.org, sacw.net) saw people of different ideological persuasion coming together, including former Atomic Energy Regulatory Board Chairman A. Gopalakrishnan and Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace activists (including myself). Even Indian Institute of Science (Bangalore) director Prof. P. Balaram signed up, a rare thing for a top scientist to do.

This appeal comes just as two workers at Fukushima have died. Nuclear power zealots had predicted that the accidents wouldn't harm plant employees, leave alone the public.

Fukushima's operator, Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), admits that three other employees have suffered severe radiation burns and many others have been exposed to radiation. The public is at risk. Radionuclides have contaminated milk, vegetables and fish in Fukushima and nearby.

Radiation levels at the plant are 1,000 millisieverts an hour, whereas the highest annual permissible dose for

employees is 30 millisieverts. Water and steam have been released, containing iodine-131, caesium-137 and strontium-90. These have been detected thousands of kilometres away.

Iodine-31 concentrates in the thyroid, caesium-137 in many other tissues, and strontium-90 in bones.

Fukushima's health damage will be revealed not through early deaths, but through slow, virtually endless low-radiation exposure, which produces cancers. Thanks to early evacuation, the Fukushima death-toll won't be as high as Chernobyl's (estimated at

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34,000 to 70,000 deaths).

However, the reactors contain 40 times the caesium inventory of Chernobyl. If only a tenth of this is released, its impact would be four times greater than Chernobyl's.

According to estimates based on data from a UN agency, Fukushima has already released iodine-131 equal to 20% of that released from Chernobyl and half as much caesium-137.

Fukushima happened not because of the earthquake and tsunami, but because these triggered mishaps in reactors already vulnerable to catastrophic accidents. All reactor designs can undergo core meltdowns. Natural calamities only make these more likely.

Fukushima's reactors weren't designed for high-magnitude earthquakes and tsunamis. Their primary containment, the vessel holding the reactor, was weak.

Besides, spent fuel was stored in the reactor building. Unlike reactors, spent-fuel pools don't have reinforced structures. The roof of Reactor 4 spent-fuel pool was blown off. The spent-fuel got heated and the water boiled off, releasing radioactivity. India's Tarapur reactors have the same spent-fuel storage

design.

The Fukushima crisis still remains uncontrolled. Three reactors suffered a partial core meltdown, one to the extent of 70%. Four of the six reactors, poisoned by seawater, must be scrapped.

The immediate challenge is to keep the reactors cool and seal the cracks that water is leaking through. TEPCO claims its sealing efforts have finally succeeded. How reliable the seals are remains to be seen.

Seawater radiation levels near Fukushima were millions of times

higher than permissible. If the Fukushima staff is evacuated, the reactors could undergo a full meltdown.

If industrially advanced Japan couldn't handle a nuclear crisis, it defies credulity that India's shoddy Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) can do so. Its denials are unconvincing.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has ordered a thorough review of India's nuclear installations, especially on their capacity to withstand earthquakes and tsunamis. But Nuclear Power Corporation Chairman S.K. Jain boasts: "We have got total knowledge and design of the seismic activities" and DAE reactors are planned for "[the] worst seismic activities and tsunamis."

However, Dr. Singh said on March 29: "The people of India have to be convinced about the safety and security of our own nuclear power plants. We should bring greater openness and transparency ... and improve our capacity to respond to the public desire to be kept informed about ... issues ... of concern to them. I would like to see accountability and transparency in the functioning of our nuclear ... plants."

This was a slap in the face of the DAE, now the laughing-stock of the

arbitrary arrests. The security forces, it is alleged, often "act with impunity." The failure to investigate fully these alleged "killings" has also been raised in the Report.

Prison conditions in Bangladesh remains "life threatening," as reported. It speaks also of discrimination against women and violence against them. Trafficking in persons has been mentioned as a serious problem.

In an immediate reaction, Foreign Minister Dipu Moni was critical of the Report. In a press conference she termed the sources of the Report "weak and analysis is not properly done."

The question that needs to be asked is whether our government is able to take credible steps if human rights violations take place. Mavericks, if any, in security agencies need to act within law which they are mandated to protect. No exceptions, as that is our state policy.

We must remember that Bangladesh is the sixth largest democracy in the world, with the third largest Muslim majority population. From the point of political ideology as well as our ethical and moral moorings, we can never be a people who will condone human rights violations.

It is not this "cut and paste" American report on human rights practices that should be alerting us each year to any vulnerability. Our national ethos demands scintillating standards on human rights. It has been encoded in the Bangladesh Constitution. Strict adherence to these standards is what is now expected.

Let us not forget that history is the sum total of things that could have been avoided. History is also a vast early warning system.

It is our own standard on human rights that must silence the critics and caution the detractors to improve their own standards before they bring their sights to bear on us.

The writer is a former Ambassador and the Chairman of the Centre for Foreign Affairs Studies. E-mail: ashfaq303@hotmail.com

global scientific community. But we need more than a slapa radical review of India's nuclear power policy and safety audit by a high-level committee which includes non-DAE experts and civil society representatives.

India must abandon plans for multiple-reactor "nuclear power parks." A crisis in one reactor can produce "common mode failure" and affect other reactors. India must certainly not import untested designs, such as Areva's European Pressurised Reactors, planned for Jaitapur in Maharashtra.

Finally, India must build capacity to evaluate reactor designs for safety by evolving stringent norms for materials, structures and emergency-control systems.

This cannot be done by India's Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB), which former chairman Gopalakrishnan calls a "toothless pool." The AERB must be separated from the DAE and strengthened with non-DAE personnel, an independent budget and equipment.

Dr. Singh must hold broad-based consultations with independent experts with experience of safety design, disaster management and evacuation.

Most important, pending a review and safety audit, India must impose a moratorium on future nuclear construction and revoke recent clearances to projects like Jaitapur. These were based on sloppy environmental impact assessments, in violation of public-hearing norms, and with numerous vacuous conditions.

The Jaitapur project was cleared for political reasons six days before French President Nicolas Sarkozy's visit last December.

A "pause-and-review" approach to nuclear power isn't extreme. If Germany, China and Switzerland can adopt it and suspend nuclear expansion plans, so can India. Safety is too precious to be sacrificed to appease nuclear lobbies.