

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Predictable actions - predictable outcome?

Sustaining gains in social sectors

Safety net outreach through better delivery mechanism imperative

DESPITE successes in attaining better indicators in social sectors, Bangladesh still faces the dual challenges of ensuring food security for its ever-growing population and alleviating abject poverty.

The country's achievements in reducing child mortality, its social safety net programmes (SSNPs) to protect the most vulnerable social groups and tripling food production over a period of three decades have earned worldwide acclaim.

Understandably, increased farm investment, policy reforms and institutional support have gone into these accomplishments.

But fresh challenges from shrinking the acreages of arable lands vis-à-vis population growth and saturation of earlier agricultural methods and technology to boost production threaten to eclipse the successes. That in other words means that the danger of food insecurity still stares the nation in the face.

To overcome the challenges, the need for further modernising agricultural methods, scientific management, longer term investment in agriculture and undertaking effective population control measures have become necessary.

So far as scientific agriculture is concerned, introducing hybrid crops for higher yields and crops that can survive in hostile conditions including climate change, using biological methods to fight pests, increasing nutritional contents of the staples and diversifying the dietary habits of the people will be important. To ward off malnutrition, the people will have to be made aware about the link between agriculture, nutrition and health. At the same time, the knowledge of modern scientific methods of cultivation has to be disseminated among the farmers still hooked to age-old agricultural practices.

The competing needs and challenges further demand that the mechanisms to deliver the goods are made more efficient. As for example, the Social Safety Nets Programmes (SSNPs) to address the needs of the ultra-poor lack coordination and have leakages. These pose the threat of defeating the entire purpose of channelling the large amounts of fund from the state exchequer for those programmes. It necessitates streamlining the SSNPs to make the delivery mechanism of the benefits for the poor efficient and plugging the administrative loopholes through which the leakages occur.

In short, the major tasks before the nation will be to protect the gains so far made to ensure food security, fight poverty and prepare for the new challenges on a sustainable basis.

Happy Bijoya Dashami

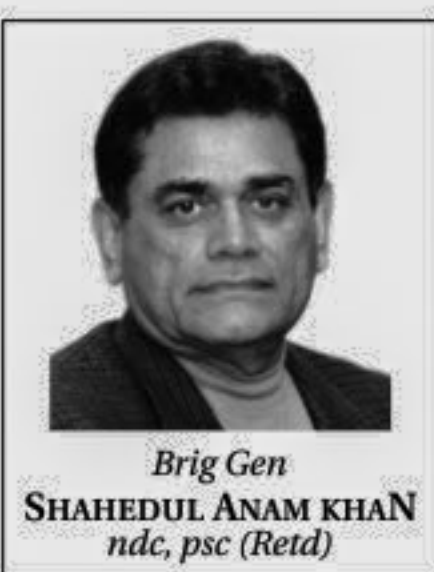
The divine and the spiritual meet

THE observance of Bijoy Dashami, happening as it does in a spirit of joy, is in a very large sense a reassertion of faith by those who hold fast to the tenets of the Hindu religion. And religion is but another term for the many ways in which men and women identify with the Creator, indeed with the divinities they hold faith by. This morning, and all day today, Bangladesh's Hindu community as also Hindus elsewhere around the world will call forth within themselves the verve and the reflective spirit so necessary in a renewal of belief in the wonders of life.

And yet there is much more than a mere celebration of life that comes with Bijoya Dashami, indeed with the entirety of the puja season. For the truth holds that on this tenth day of the puja observances, it is a triumph of the human spirit over the forces of evil which manifests itself for the world's Hindus. From a bigger perspective, it is a time when the human condition, constantly under assault from sinister elements, rouses itself in all its enormity of self-assertion and delivers that final, decisive blow which sends darkness scattering before an onrush of light. In simple terms, the essence of Durga Puja, apart from a symbolic worship of Mother Durga, subsists in the ability of man to emerge victorious over all those elements ceaselessly engaged in war against all that is good and noble. Victory thus is sweet, to be relished in true remembrance of the majesty of divinity. It is victory which, once it solidifies itself, translates into the theme of the universal brotherhood of people everywhere.

And thus it is that today, through the immersion of the goddess in the water, again a reflection of the purity defining the links between the divine and the mortal, the worldly and the spiritual come together. Happiness is all.

Our felicitations go out to the members of Bangladesh's Hindu community. In the non-communal ambience of our society, we partake with them of the good cheer they bring into the Bijoya Dashami celebra-



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

WHO is anyone to disagree with the remarks of renowned thinkers? But sometimes one has to with all the reverence at

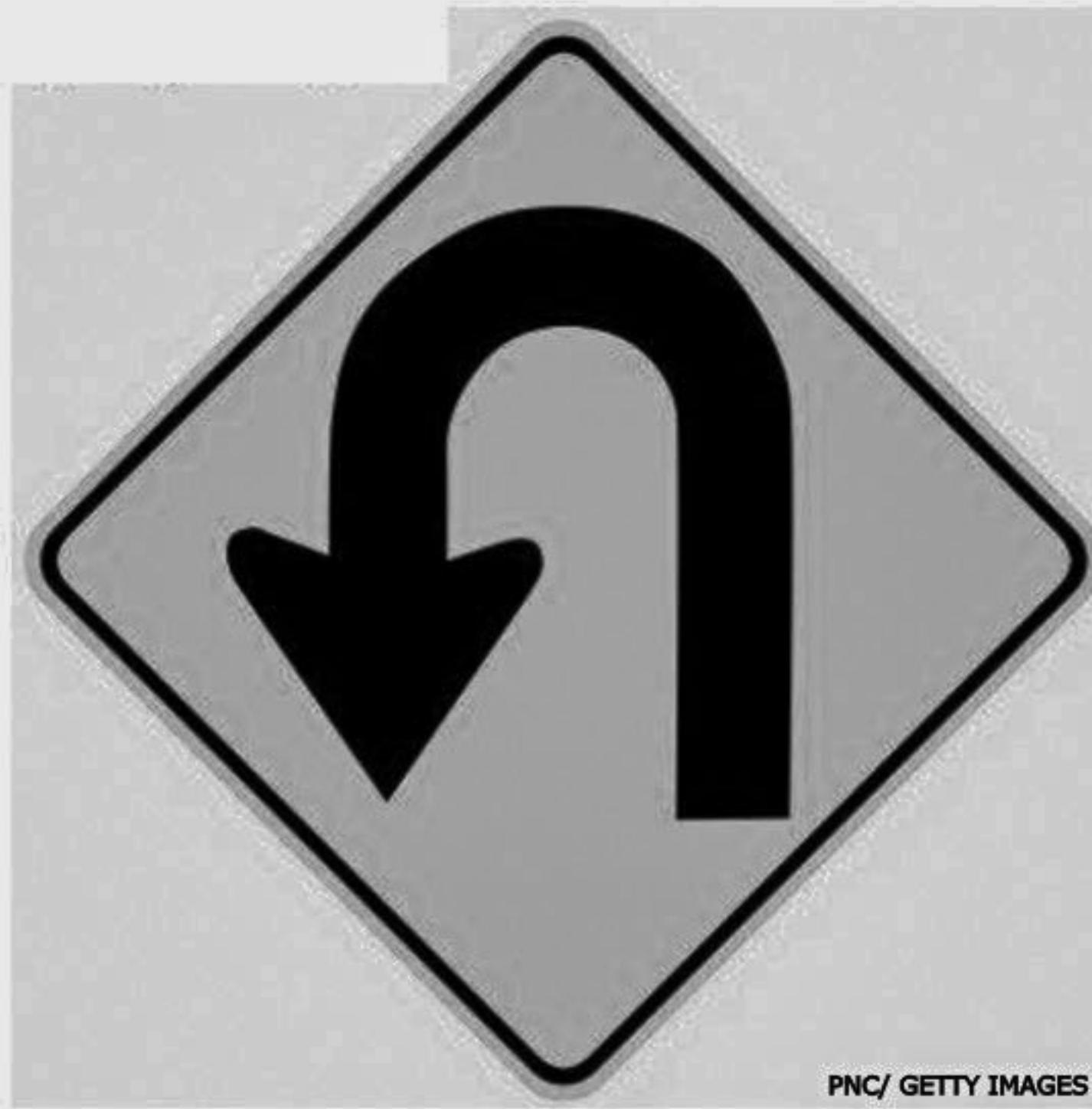
one's disposal. For example, when one eminent philosopher says "Animals are reliable, many full of love, true in their affections, predictable in their actions, grateful and loyal. Difficult standards for people to live up to," one has to take issue with it.

For the general breed of men those may be very difficult standards to live up to, but our politicians, leaving aside reliability, love, affection, gratefulness, and may be loyalty, would find themselves in very good company when it comes to the predictable pattern of their actions, reactions and behaviour regarding political issues. For example, it was quite predictable what the attitude and behaviour of BNP would be after the results of the 2008 elections were announced, which was quite the same as that of the AL when the 2001 parliamentary election results were announced. How canny it is for the parties to be so similar in their stance.

This time round too the very predictable behaviour of the two major political parties causes us concern, because of what the final outcome might be. The issues today are exactly those that were flaunted as demands by the opposition just before the handover of power to the CTG in 2006. And with different views being uttered on political matters, one cannot but be overcome by a feeling of déjà vu. The same old act is being repeated.

One has to just cast one's mind back to half a decade when the BNP-led 4 party alliance's term in office was coming to a close, and to most it was apparent that all that were needed to be done by way of maneuverings to ensure the next

The issues today are exactly those that were flaunted as demands by the opposition just before the handover of power to the CTG in 2006. And with different views being uttered on political matters, one cannot but be overcome by a feeling of déjà vu.



PNC/ GETTY IMAGES

term, had been done by the BNP before power was handed over to the CTG to step in the interregnum, to run the parliamentary elections. And the AL reaction had been, predictably, the same as that of BNP's now which feels that everything has been done by the AL-led Grand Alliance to ensure that they do not lose the next election.

This time, however, the AL has the sanction of the verdicts of the highest court to implement all that they want to, remaining aboveboard as far as the legality of their actions are concerned. But everything that is legal may not necessarily be moral.

And the respective stand of both

the parties, in power and the opposition now, as then, is marked by the same degree of intransigence on the part of both. The difference is that the parties have been made to switch roles due to the verdict of 2008 elections. And while the positions of the BNP and the AL may have changed, the stand of the opposition and the ruling party has remained the same in respect of the CTG and the EC, among other issues.

We are hearing the same expression of mistrust leveled at the Election Commission (EC) by the opposition now as was done by the opposition during the last regime. The BNP wants

to have nothing to do with the EC and the present crop of commissioners. And we have seen the vigour with which the EC was defended by the BNP, and how the virtues of the then CEC extolled, when it was in office.

It is unfortunate that democratic institutions, particularly the statutory ones, have never been able to garner confidence of the opposition, and that perhaps may not be the fault of the opposition entirely. Perhaps some of the heads of these institutions cannot hide their partisan propensity, and violate their oath of office to ingratiate themselves to those that have put him or her there, by resorting to the unholy schemes.

Familiar too is the insistence by the ruling party now, the AL, that the idea of CTG is all but a dead issue and merits no resuscitation, and that the next elections will be held under the present government come what may, while the BNP is quite unwilling to entertain any other system, to conduct the election, but the caretaker, which it had opposed tooth and nail once upon a time, and for which the AL had put the people under so much strain and which started the culture of boycott of parliament. And none of them suffers from any qualms for the U-turn on issues that they had so passionately supported and which with equal passion they now oppose.

We are only too aware of the situation that the country was brought to the last time because of intransigence and obstinacy of the opposition and the ruling party, stemming from the motivation to perpetuate power on the one hand, and regaining power on the other. We are also wiser, courtesy the leaks by WikiLeaks (to many there is very little new in what has been leaked) about the reliance and confidence of the political leadership on various "powers," internal and external, which does very little credit to their political integrity.

We would hope the country would be spared the trauma this time.

The writer is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.
E-mail: sakhan@thedailystar.net

The decline of the West

KARIM RASLAN

HISTORY is written by the victors. Losers rarely get much coverage let alone a mention.

In Malaysia, unlike in Indonesia, the forces of political conservatism ultimately won power from our former colonial masters. As such, the "Left" -- as PAS Deputy President Mat Sabu discovered -- has been forgotten, if not vilified outright.

However, interpretations of history change from decade to decade. Indeed, there is no one "history." Instead, there are many, and generally it's the powerful that get to determine whose version of events should dominate.

What happens though when a once all-powerful nation begins to falter? How does it write or rewrite its history? Such a shift can be seen in the recent explosion of writing on the supposed decline of Western -- particularly American -- power.

Historian Niall Ferguson has charted the process in "Civilisation: The West and the Rest." Ferguson argues that the "West" (particularly Britain and America) was able to surpass others (such as the Chinese and Ottoman Empires) due to six "killer applications" -- competition, science, property rights, medicine, the consumer society and work ethic.

Ferguson argues that the West perfected all six simultaneously, whereas "the Rest" developed only a handful or else let their comparative advantages in these fields stagnate. His main thrust, however, is that the West's current weakness stems from a loss of faith in its own civilisational values. In short, the West has failed to renew its commitment to its "killer apps."

The West, therefore, ought to "recognise the superiority" of its own

civilisation because it offers societies "the best available set of economic, social and political institutions."

One may of course disagree with Ferguson's thesis but his arguments are compelling.

His contention that the Islamic world declined because it closed its minds and borders is certainly persuasive, if unoriginal. At the same time, Ferguson's tome is a clear sign that there's a growing trend amongst writers discussing (if not agonising) over the West's "decline."

These worries are further fuelled by the ongoing global financial crisis and political paralysis that's slowly undermining both the European Union and the United States.

Indeed, the latest issue of the literary journal *New Yorker* includes a superb essay by Adam Gopnick, which claims that "declinism" has



RAY MEDICI/ GETTY IMAGES

The phrase "decline of the West" was used as early as 1918 by the German historian Oswald Spengler. Nor were such fears of decay exclusively Western: writers and historians such as Ibn Khaldun, Tun Sri Lanang and Sima Qian have dwelt on similar themes as they charted the rise and fall of civilisations.

now morphed into a veritable literary genre -- a pet topic for academics and pundits alike.

But is this really something new? "Cassandras" (named after the Trojan princess who foresaw her own city's destruction at the hands of the Greeks) -- the harbingers of doom and decline -- have long been with us, even in times of great prosperity.

Indeed, according to Gopnick, the phrase "decline of the West" was used as early as 1918 by the German historian Oswald Spengler. Nor were such fears of decay exclusively

Western: writers and historians such as Ibn Khaldun, Tun Sri Lanang and Sima Qian have dwelt on similar themes as they charted the rise and fall of civilisations.

Moreover, the mere fact that these books are available across the globe suggests the depth and breadth of such concerns. At the same time they also reveal a passionate commitment to the idea of renewal and reform. Ferguson is clearly a believer in the West's capacity to re-invent and re-energise itself.

For us in Malaysia, these books -- and there are countless others in

airport bookshops -- reinforce the sense of a world shifting on its axis, of a power alignment that prioritises China and India over Europe and the United States.

We are faced with the challenge of adapting to these newly (re-)emerging powers whilst not forgetting the strengths (or "killer apps") that made the Western nations great, such as the emancipation of women, democracy and religious tolerance.

And it is in this realm that we need writers and historians such as Ferguson and Gopnick -- figures who'll both commend and condemn with equal weight, stepping aside from mere politics.

The new geo-political landscape will demand prodigious powers of concentration and leadership. Mere rhetoric will be useless. Malay ultras and/or an obsession with *bangsawan* politics won't help us in coping with either China and/or India.

History requires candour and honesty. It also demands a degree of openness. We need to be willing to accept the idea that there are many versions of the truth. Our narrow-minded views on history hamper us as we chart our way forward. You need to know yourself in order to plan for the future. Self-knowledge is critical.

I would argue that it's only when we as Malaysians can start to engage about our collective history with the same vigour and honesty as our counterparts in the West then we'll be ready to deal with the challenges outlined by these writers.

History -- our many histories, Malay, Chinese, Indian, Dayak and so forth -- requires objectivity and honesty. If we can't deal with the past, how can we face the future?

© The Star, Malaysia. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement with Asia News Network.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 6

- 1923**
The great powers of World War I withdraw from Istanbul
- 1928**
Chiang Kai-Shek becomes Chairman of the Republic of China.
- 1939**
World War II: The last Polish army is defeated.
- 1973**
Egypt launches a coordinated attack with Syria against Israel leading to the Yom Kippur War.
- 1981**
Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat was assassinated.