

Merry Christmas!

Time to recall Jesus' ideals

THE birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, like the coming of any prophet into the realm of common men and women, remains a seminal event in history. For Jesus symbolised the principles of humanity and love we today associate with the values which underpin the Christian outlook on life. And coming within the ambit of this feeling of Christianity is the thought that Jesus spoke for all men and women and for all time. Those are the foundations on which religions establish themselves, the roots to which all are bound in terms of religious belief. The sense of piety we associate with faith, any faith, was precisely the message which came from Jesus, whose comprehension of sin, of cruelty as practised by those unaware of or indifferent to the ways of God, was acute enough to have him go through pain in an intensely personal way. And yet he did not complain, for greater than the pain was the agony humanity went through at the hands of the insensitive and the uncaring.

On Christmas Day, therefore, it is time to put into practice the ideals of love and piety which Jesus preached in his lifetime through all his moments of intense suffering. The message he spelt out, at every turning point of his life, was clear and unambiguous: that there is a God who loves us and which love is but an invitation to us all to do what our sense of humanity expects us to do, to our neighbours, our families, indeed to our friends and foes alike: love them as we would love ourselves. Turning the other cheek, Jesus informed us, is not a sign of weakness but a mark of humility. And humility is what constitutes the core of humanity's survival. Everything else, everything which speaks to us of pride and hubris and envy, only demeans the individual. It is this message from Jesus that people need to rekindle in their souls today, especially at a time when a brazen demonstration of power and a blatant display of arrogance constantly make a wreckage of the purity of the heart.

We wish all our readers, especially those belonging to the Christian community, a Merry Christmas. Let Jesus' love suffuse our souls with happiness.

A patriot exits

We mourn Razzak's passing away

WE are saddened by the demise of veteran political leader Abdur Razzak, drawing a curtain over an eventful career spanning five decades of the country's chequered political history. His protracted illness under serious physical conditions and death away from home in a London hospital added poignancy to the sense of loss pervading the nation left in a state of deep mourning.

A steadfast believer in AL ideals and a staunch follower of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, he had been an asset for the AL. He galvanised the youth force with his tremendous organising capability and rallied it behind the 1962 student upheaval, 1966 Six-point movement, 1969 mass upsurge, 1970 elections and the Liberation War. He was dynamic, popular, and appealing, sterling qualities that made him a natural leader of the younger generations.

He was twice general secretary of Bangladesh Chhatra League and its parent oranisation Awami League besides serving the party as its organising secretary. He went on to become an influential presidium member of the party. Till his demise he had been serving as chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on water resources ministry.

Part of the credit for the Awami League being a highly organised party must go to Razzak. As a measure of his sacrifice and devotion to his party, one has only to cite his incarceration in Pakistan as well as in free Bangladesh.

He had served as water resources minister in the AL government between 1996 and 2001. He was never defeated in any election he contested -- emerging as member of the Provincial Assembly in 1970, and member of parliament in 1973, 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2008. That's how his roots struck deep into the constituency he represented.

He was a true patriot with the courage of conviction to fight for the causes he held dear to his heart to the last ounce of his strength.

He was genuine and sincere in whatever he did. He will be missed by his party and the nation.

We express our condolences to his bereaved family.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 25

800

Coronation of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor, in Rome.

1947

The Constitution of the Republic of China goes into effect.

1977

Prime Minister of Israel Menachem Begin meets in Egypt with President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat.

1989

Nicolae Ceau*escu, former communist President of Romania and his wife, First-Deputy Prime-Minister Elena are condemned to death and executed after a flawed and summary trial.

1991

Mikhail Gorbachev resigns as president of the Soviet Union (the union itself is dissolved the next day). Ukraine's referendum is finalized and Ukraine officially leaves the Soviet Union.

2000

Russian President Vladimir Putin signs a bill into law that officially establishes a new National Anthem of Russia, with music adopted from the anthem of the Soviet Union that was composed by Alexander Vasilyevich Alexandrov.

SUNDAY POUCH



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

AS 2011 winds down and the world takes a pause, we have a chance now to look over our shoulder. The year has been phenomenal in many ways. It has seen some of the best of times in recent history. It has also seen the worst of times.

The United Nations declared 2011 as the International Year of Forests and the International Year of Chemistry. To the Chinese it was the Year of the Rabbit.

How do we rate the events that took place this year? Do we consider some of them significant enough to be remembered far into the future?

To begin with, there was the Tunisian fruit-seller Bouazizi from the town of Sidi Bouzid, who immolated himself. He was frustrated by his failure to earn an honest living although he was highly educated. He was also disgusted with the high-handedness of the authorities who prevented him from earning his livelihood.

His act sparked the historic tumult that shifted the politics of North Africa and the Middle East from the "convenience of dictatorship" to the beginnings of democracy. Revolutions spread from Tunisia to Egypt, to Libya, to Yemen, to Bahrain and to Syria. There were also challenges to authority in Jordan and Morocco. But not all protests were successful. Yet the spark from the fruit-seller gave notice to all leaders of the world: shape up or ship out.

Close on the heels of the "Arab Spring" came the gargantuan devastation wrought by nature in Japan. A triple havoc was caused when a strong earthquake hit the Honshu region followed by an unprecedented tsunami. Before the scale of death and destruction could be even understood, there was a meltdown in the Fukushima nuclear energy plant in that vicinity. The government and the people of Japan wres-

tled to cool down and stabilise the nuclear facility before it spun out of control and spread nuclear radiation in the entire Asia Pacific region.

However, the world was given some relief and respite when the news of a royal wedding was announced in Great Britain. The groom was none other than the second in line to the British throne Prince William. He was marrying a commoner Kate Middleton. The glitz and glamour enthralled the world. Everyone seemed to be riveted to this extravaganza for just a few days in April.

But then came the astonishing

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news of the death of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in May. A US Navy Seal team killed him close to a Pakistani military base, and dumped his body in the Arabian Sea.

As things were settling down, another mayhem was about to take place. In staid Norway, an extremist, Anders Breivik, took pot-shots at innocent civilians who were holidaying in an idyllic island. 85 persons were killed. He said that the killings were "atrocious" but "necessary."

The Arab Spring that had enchanted the world in the early part of the year gained momentum in Libya. The US-led Nato, through a UN Security Council resolution, imposed a "no fly zone" over the country and targeted Libya's colourful dictator Muammer Qaddafi and his forces and decimated his military assets. Nato and the anti-Qaddafi forces zeroed in on Gaddafi himself and without any regard to bringing him to justice for his past misdeed killed him. His death raised many questions, which need to be answered in the future.

As 2011 was unfolding, another drama was being played out around the world. The 2008 economic recession and its after-effects gripped Europe. It started to decimate the economy of Greece as the country was already heavily indebted. In spite of financial bailouts the Greek economy could not stabilise. Millions remained out of work, banks folded, exports dropped and living standards plummeted.

Nor did the economies of neighbouring Spain and Italy fare any better. The governments in all these countries fell and new governments had to be elected. But the economic

downturn also spread to other Euro-zone countries. The need of the hour was stricter regulations. Germany and France joined hands and introduced stricter norms. But that did not prevent the malaise from spreading to other countries and continents around the world. Indeed, the world economy in 2011 seemed to be in a flux.

The US economy, which too was heavily indebted, was also hemorrhaging. President Obama had given an election pledge to withdraw US troops from Iraq, and thereby reduce state expenses. He, therefore, started US troop withdrawals from the beginning of the year, and the last of them left Iraq by December 2011. The withdrawal was peaceful, but it led to the inevitable question - why was US there in the first place?

Now that we have given a broad overview of the events of 2011, it is up to you to choose which one of these will have historic significance. Will any one of them continue to haunt us in the future? As a wise man had once said: "History is a rearview mirror. It helps us to focus

on the windshield in order to move forward."

But here we are arrested by another thought. In each of the events we seem to have discovered some essence. These have provided images which are both delicate and intense. They have in many cases assumed human form and allowed us to sketch the actors as either heroes or villains.

We have therefore voted the following as heroes of 2011:

- The fruit vendor Bouazizi from Tunisia;
- The Japanese people who faced the wrath of nature with equanimity and self-discipline. They have taught us once again that with determination a nation can be invigorated even by a tragedy;
- The ordinary folk in Europe and elsewhere who in spite of tremendous economic difficulties have remained steadfast and did not give up hope about their economic future. They reformed, reengineered and recalibrated their lives in order to bring back normalcy into their lives.

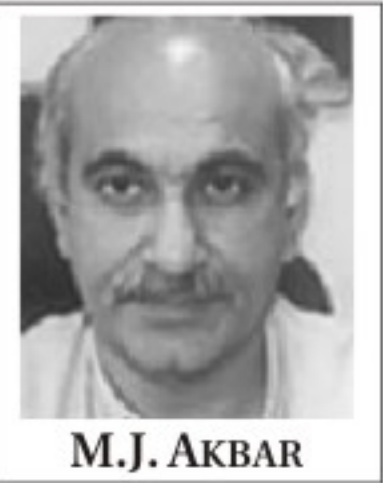
The following could be the villains of 2011:

- The dictators in the Middle East and North Africa who were forced to give up their power before their people's anger and revolt. Those dictators who have not yet relented are also our villains;
- Mr. Anders Breivik, the extremist from Norway who thought that he did not owe anything to the world. He wanted to get rid of all sane people so that his insane writ could prevail;
- The person or the group who shot Muammer Gaddafi. Gaddafi was physically down and out. But he had many stories to tell. Many questions to answer. Why did he keep his people under wraps for more than four decades? Could the assassin/s have been a part of a bigger conspiracy? Would you agree with us and vote likewise?

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BYLINE

History in capital letters



M.J. AKBAR

EXCUSE me for wearing a wet blanket to a party, but didn't a chap called Shahabuddin Mohammed, more familiar to us as Shah Jehan, builder of the Taj Mahal, make Delhi the capital of India in 1638?

The current enthusiasm for December 12, 1911, the day on which King George V decided that his Raj would be better managed from the Mughal capital than the colonial epicentre, Calcutta, looks odd. The government has sponsored a year-long splash of festivity and celebratory literature that seems to suggest that the British gave Delhi its prime status on our political map. The Raj, in fact, devastated Delhi in 1857 and killed more than a million Indians in a frenzy of revenge after its narrow victory in our first war of independence.

If 1857 was the year that Mughals lost the city, and 1911 the moment of British arrival, Delhi has not been capital of India for only 54 out of 373 years. We could have waited till 2038 to enjoy Delhi's 400th birthday, but even a yogi might tire of such a demand on his patience. One could argue of course that Delhi became the capital of the Sultans after the victory of Muhammad Ghor in 1192, and stayed at the centre of Indian history till Babur moved to Agra after 1527, but that would be a

trifle pedantic. The Sultanate is visible only in graveyards, but the Mughal city, Shahjehanabad, remains living space, with dramatic architecture that is still in use, and an extraordinary culture that has influenced the life and literature of northern India.

Even if the British narrative is more acceptable to contemporary India than the Mughal one, facts insist on a variation. King George only inseminated a project, and it would be a very long pregnancy. Shah Jehan took 10 years to build the Red Fort; it would take Lutyens 15 before he completed the palace, now known as the Rashtrapati Bhavan, that became a Viceroy's home-cum-office. The Raj did not actually govern from Delhi until Lord Irwin, Britain's only vegetarian viceroy, turned up in 1926. He is principally remembered for negotiating the beginning of the British end with Mahatma Gandhi, over the famous talks that followed the suspension of the salt *satyagraha*.

The British ruled for only some two decades from Delhi after having exercised power effectively and expansively for 16 decades from

Calcutta. It does not seem, in retrospect, that King George's decision was particularly fortuitous, at least from the British point of view.

Perhaps the right way to go about it would be to start a year's celebration in Calcutta -- to mark a century of relief from British rule.

Would Delhi's self-congratulatory mood be more justified if we shifted the focus from "capital" to "India?" This suggestion implies that the Mughal Empire was merely Mughal while the British created a city that became the hub of a united nation. This is certainly the argument encouraged by a host of right-wing English historians, who tend to get touchy about nationalist narratives. Once again, facts interfere. For at least

a century and a half the Mughals ruled a much larger geography than the British did during the nine decades between 1857 and 1947, the apogee of their period. Over 600 maharajahs, nawabs and rajas had independent realms across the land, including most of the South from Deccan to Travancore. Like the Mughals, the British were a pre-eminent power, but not the only

presence.

But upper crust Delhi is festive about something, of that there is no doubt. What is it? Is it that New Delhi sounds and looks "modern" while Old Delhi is psychologically closer to an ancient ghetto? It is logical for the upwardly mobile to identify with the former. It would probably shock today's elite to learn that Akbar, Jehangir and Shah Jehan were far wealthier than their Tudor and Stuart counterparts in London, and that in 1750 India had 24% of the world manufacturing output as compared to Britain's 2%. But it is not their fault. No one mentioned this at school.

I suspect that today's aspiring India feels an emotional continuity with the Raj not because of British rule but because of the English language. Farsi, the court language of the Mughals, has disappeared completely, while English is on the verge of invincible dominance. The British were never as powerful as the language they left behind. The heirs of Mirza Ghalib might get their chance in 2038, if there is anyone left to claim his inheritance.

Does all this matter? Not if it is an excuse for some much-needed fun, a birthright of the ruling class. Delhi, in all its myriad manifestations, has always loved the present far more than the past it reinvents, or the future it cannot foretell.

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