

Shubho Nababarsha!

Let it be a time for renewal of ethos

IT is that time of year when we rediscover ourselves through the prism of cultural tradition. For Pahela Baishakh is that particular occasion when we choose to leave the past, with all its lessons taken note of, behind us and look forward to the future, with all the possibilities it throws our way. Baishakh is, in a coruscating way, a time for us to renew ourselves through remembering our history and the roots of the heritage we have always upheld in our long journey through time.

As we step into the Bangla year 1420, let us recall all those men and women and all those moments that have made singular contributions to the culture we so proudly observe today as Bangalees. Our poets, our bauls, our political figures, indeed our ancestors across the landscape, have through sustained struggle and a devotion as rare as it is remarkable, brought us to the stage where we find ourselves today. In the natural ambience of our pastoral realities lie embedded all those hallmarks of tradition that have consistently renewed the appeal and permanence of our distinctive identity as a people before the councils of the world.

That identity speaks of the Bangalee combining within himself all the elements of timeless tradition and the call of modernity to give himself and his social surroundings more of the substantive he has been bringing into play down the years. The message of Pahela Baishakh is simple: the Bangalee cannot turn his back on his culture and indeed utilize this culture as a vehicle that will link him to concepts of modern living and thought. In other words, heritage is the baseline on which the Bangalee nation will deal with the call of modernity. The traditional Bangalee must also be a cosmopolitan Bangalee.

A clear, unequivocal message goes out to Bangladesh and its people on this first day of the Bangla New Year: let us come together, across our differences, across our prejudices, across our parochial politics, to reclaim our hold on history, to reach out to the heavens.

In a pluralistic society like ours we must be tolerant of and accommodative to differing and even dissenting views.

We wish our readers Shubho Nababarsha!

Violence at Fatikchhari

We strongly condemn it

THE bloody violence over an anti-hartal procession that the remote village of Bhujpur at Fatikchhari upazila in Chittagong saw last Thursday was as shocking as it was disquieting. Three members of the ruling Awami League were killed, over a hundred people were hurt, including policemen, and a hundred motorised vehicles were burnt during the mayhem.

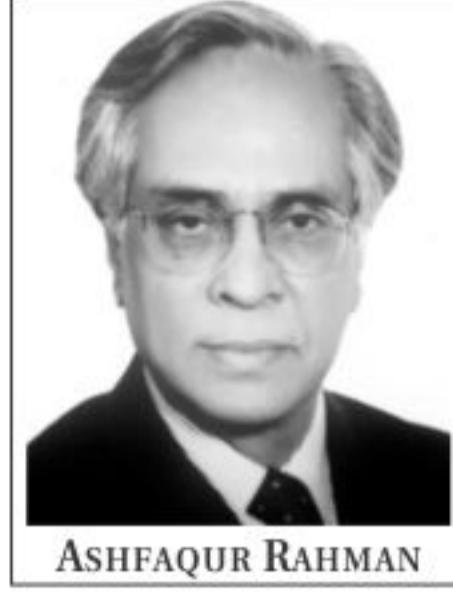
We condemn the mindless violence in the strongest terms. The perpetrators of the outrage, whatever their political identities, deserve the highest punishment under the law.

The circumstances of the deadly mayhem are bizarre and blood-curdling. The local leaders of the ruling Awami League and their activists were learnt to have been staging a procession in which a large number of motorised-vehicle riders also participated. But when the procession was returning, someone from the local mosque raised a false alarm over the loudspeaker that the procession marchers had abducted a teacher of the local madrasa and that they were also going to attack the madrasa. The announcement on the mike drew a large crowd armed with sticks, knives and other lethal weapons from the nearby village including, reportedly, activists of Jamaat-Shibir and Hefajat-e-Islam who swooped on the anti-hartal marchers with vengeance.

Holding procession to protest hartal is nothing new. But raising alarm and widespread panic among the public over anti-hartal demonstration leading to deadly violence and loss of life and property is quite unprecedented.

The scale, ferocity and severity of what happened at Fatikchhari should be a precious lesson for the law-enforcers. So as not to be taken by surprise in the face of a similar kind of mob madness in the future, they must mount strict vigilance and gather enough intelligence to

Welcome 1420!



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

AS the first rays of the sun caress your face this morning, you can be sure that you have crossed into the year 1420 of the Bengali calendar. The green plant shoots are there for you to see, so are flowers of every hue and colour. Nature has already given up the old and has embraced the new. Welcome 1420!

But can we forget the disappointments of 1419? Politics here resembled an old maggot. Dried, crinkled and gasping. Leadership in the true sense was nowhere to be seen. Mistakes after mistakes were made. But there was no one to own up to them. Crises after crises were wrought yet it was the people in general who suffered. Then suddenly out of the blue came forward the youth of Bangladesh. They barged into the political scene. Like a breath of fresh air they revived the spirit of the War of Liberation. Everyone stood up to welcome them.

Windows were opened to allow the fresh air to flow in. But with it came foul air too. The political space suddenly became toxic. Another force reared its head. This time it came in the garb of religion. Yet all political parties vied with each other to woo the late comer. But alas the political space had suddenly become overcrowded. Politics and religion seemed entwined. Ossification seemed to have set in our politics.

The nation today in many ways also stands divided. 1419 saw the process deepening. First there was the ideological divide. There were those imbued with the spirit of Liberation and those steeped in obscurantism. Then there was the economic divide. The rich got richer, the poor still hanging on with not much to look forward to. Economic opportunities were available to some and nearly closed to the rest.

But the social divide was even more shameful. On the one hand we saw the fortunate few who remained well connected and rich beyond relative comprehension. They lived in gated communities. They even banned the use of the traditional *lungi* (sarong) around where they lived. They went on holiday in the Caribbean or in Europe. They treated their cold in Singapore and attended to their duties in air conditioned comfort. With wealth they seemed to have no use of the society they were born

into.

Then there was the new rich, a growing band of people who have acquired wealth but do not have taste. They hop madly when their sensibilities are touched. They wheel and deal, and send their children to some of the most expensive schools abroad. They do not know whether on return their children would have any stake in this country and its rich culture. A foppish class had been born.

Then there is the middle class, a good many of them professionals and business persons. They want to improve their standard of living. They appreciate middle class values and try to imbue them among the people belonging to this class. And then there is the struggling mass, living on meager earnings, going abroad by selling their fixed assets to improve their lot through sweat and grime or to live here in pittance. Their's is the story of hope and

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disappointments. Finally, the bottom social class. They hold on to life, scrounging whatever society throws their way. 1419 saw the Bangladesh society continue to be defined and configured negatively.

So as you sit on a chair in one of the cultural venues and enjoy the Pahela Baishakh festivities while slurping *pantha bhath*, spare a thought for the country and society we live in. Think how we shaped 1419 and where and who failed us. Do we have the gumption to dream of a better tomorrow? New Year celebration all around the world is a time for reflection and new resolve.

None of us have a crystal ball to gaze at and tell what is to come in 1420. But Bangladeshis everywhere must be sharing their thoughts on what they want. Scratch a sensitive soul and he would like to see the following:

• He would like to see the end of *hartals* and *hartal*

related violence all over the country;

- He would like to see obscurantist forces retreat to their lair and not dare to come out again. But that does not mean that some of their legitimate demands are not to be attended to;
- He would like to see a financially more inclusive society than in the past. The absolute poor and the poor are provided opportunities so that they can play their due role in shaping the economy;
- He would like to see the government and the opposition political parties sit down and finalise the modus operandi to hold peaceful and credible general elections to be held in a year's time;
- The International War Crimes Tribunal carries on its work with due diligence and gives punishment to the extent that the crimes committed by the accused deserve under law. No excesses anywhere;
- Just as the opposition parties have the right to protest responsibly the excesses of the government, they also have the responsibility to see that their cadres do not resort to violence and destroy public and private property just to gain politically;
- He would like to see that strict steps are taken by the government to rein in corruption in the country. The people's faith in the state institutions needs to be restored immediately;
- No nation would like to see its fabric mutilated by ideology or wealth acquisition or by social discrimination. Timely steps have to be taken to frustrate such tendencies.

Bangladesh, this morning, is therefore standing at a crossroad. Just as 1419 had brought much distress to its people it has also proffered hope. The clash of ideologies has revealed how deep the malaise runs. To many it is an eye opener. It is now for our political and social leaders to suggest a way out. The other sign is that for decades this nation had been exposed to two major political forces. Wise counsel would have us believe that the latent power which two other new forces have brought in can be positively harnessed for the good of the country. Youth is a common factor in both these forces. It is leadership that can forge the two and carry the country forward.

1420 is going to be an interesting year for all of us. Let us push on with our dreams.

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PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



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MODI moves centre-stage!" "Modi storms in as the BJP's PM candidate." "It's Narendra Modi vs Rahul Gandhi!" "In PM mode, Modi spells out strategy on big issues."

Thus scream the headlines in leading Indian publications and TV channels -- part of a systematic corporate blitzkrieg to build up Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as a messiah of "development," who is destined to lead India.

In contrast to this hype, unprecedented in Indian history, Mr. Modi remains a deeply polarising figure internationally, nationally, and even within the Sangh Parivar, which is reluctant to name him as its prime ministerial candidate. Nothing can remove the stigma he carries for Independent India's worst anti-minority pogrom, in 2002.

Mr. Modi continues to be an abomination to conscientious citizens globally -- and to millions of Hindus and non-Hindus in India, who treasure political decency, secularism, tolerance and social inclusion.

This was once again demonstrated by the spirited protest against the invitation extended to him by Wharton Business School at the University of Pennsylvania in the US to speak long-distance. The issue was not the right to free expression, but hate speech and sanctification of his pivotal role in the Gujarat butchery. The protest conforms with the ethos and culture of US universities, evident in their opposition to the Vietnam War and demonstrations against its apologists.

In contrast stands the lionising of Mr. Modi by Indian businessmen and the corporate media. They depict him as a Knight in Shining Armour who will rescue India from economic stagnation, poverty, and missed opportunities towards "progress," and promote the "Gujarat Model" of development.

Politically, it would be wrong, and morally impermissible, to normalise a perverse, autocratic and crassly communal politician like Mr. Modi -- who has covered up the 2002 violence and shielded its perpetrators -- even if the "Gujarat Model" were worth emulating.

However, the model is deeply flawed. Gujarat's rank in per capita GDP has fallen since 1996-97 from 4th to 8th among 19 major Indian states. Haryana, Punjab, Maharashtra, Kerala and Himachal Pradesh are ahead of it. Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka are only a

Hype vs reality

notch below.

True, at 10.1% a year, Gujarat's GDP growth in 2004-2012 exceeded the 8.3% national average. But growth was even higher in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Bihar (respectively, 10.8, 10.3 and 11.4%). Even Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh have recently outperformed Gujarat.

Madhya Pradesh, with 10.1% current growth, is India's fastest-growing state. It posted impressive agricultural growth of 18.9% and 14.3% over two years. Since 2003-04, MP's revenue collection has risen fivefold and its capital outlay sixfold.

Unlike Gujarat's "trickle-down" approach, MP is state-interventionist in providing food and electricity. Its growth is also more balanced and inclusive -- unlike Gujarat's, which has neglected agriculture and the social sector. Gujarat's industrial growth is unbalanced, dominated by sectors like toxic chemicals production, ship breaking and diamond polishing, and of late, polluting

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power generation. Gujarat's agriculture, on which 52% of its people depend, is unstable. Food grain output recently suffered two sharp dips of 22% and 11%.

Gujarat isn't as great a foreign direct investment (FDI) magnet as made out. Maharashtra, Delhi, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu attracted much more FDI in 2000-2012 -- in Maharashtra's case, 6.78 times more.

Gujarat's recent growth is largely built on past gains in industry and infrastructure, but is not bad. But its human development index (HDI) story is poor. Its all-India HDI rank has fallen from six to nine. It ranks a poor 18th in literacy among Indian states.

In infant mortality, Gujarat is a low 25th. Its female infant mortality rate (51) is higher than the national average (46). Worse, its sex ratio is an abysmal 918 females per 1,000 males, well below the national ratio (940). The 0-6 sex ratio is a shameful 886, compared to 914 nationally -- 27th

lowest in India.

In poverty reduction (8.6 percentage-points between 2004 and 2009), Gujarat lags behind Tamil Nadu (13.1), Maharashtra (13.7), Odisha (19.2) or Madhya Pradesh (11.9). Employment has been almost stagnant in Gujarat since 2004-05. Less than 5% of Gujarati households are covered under the National Rural Employment Guarantee. Rural wage rates in Gujarat are among the bottom half of state rankings.

On the hunger index, Gujarat's rank is an appalling 13 among 17 major Indian states. Even sub-Saharan Africa's poorer countries do better. Nearly 45% of Gujarati children under five are malnourished. Gujarat's hunger incidence exceeds that of Punjab, Kerala and Haryana, and even of much poorer Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Rajasthan. It's in the "acute hunger" league like Bihar and Orissa.

So much for Gujarat's growth and "progress"! Gujarat has gaping economic inequalities and unacceptably poor social indices. Yet, Big Business loves the "Gujarat Model" precisely because it likes imbalances biased towards private industry and because Mr. Modi favours it with huge tax write-offs (for instance, over 60% on the Tatas' Nano project).

Mr. Modi is a "man of action" -- an autocratic quick decision-maker personifying single-window industrial approvals. Big Business adores him for his ruthless decisiveness. The Tatas, Ambanis, Adanis and Ruias have rushed to befriend and praise him.

The media reflects businessmen's admiration for Mr. Modi. Instead of soberly reporting what he says and does, and reflecting on his authoritarian politics, it has joined the pro-Modi bandwagon. It gives him respectability and paints him as the winner in a presidential-style contest, which Indian elections aren't.

The mediating factor here is the "aspirational" metropolitan upper-caste upper middle class, which is impatient with democracy and wants elitist approaches in economy and society. If that means welcoming a new führer, so be it!

The corporate media's owners, anchors and editors belong to this class. In promoting Mr. Modi, they are committing the same blunders that Hitler's and Mussolini's business backers made in the 1920s and 1930s.

They are only aggravating the grave threat that Indian democracy faces from the communal Extreme-Right.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

April 14

1865

U.S. President Abraham Lincoln is shot in Ford's Theatre by John Wilkes Booth (died April 15th).

1912

The British passenger liner RMS Titanic hits an iceberg in the North Atlantic at 11:40pm (sinks morning of April 15th).

1988

In a United Nations ceremony in Geneva, Switzerland, the Soviet Union signs an agreement pledging to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan.

2002

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez returns to office two days after being ousted and arrested by the country's military.

2003

U.S. troops in Baghdad capture Abu Abbas, leader of the Palestinian group that killed an American on the hijacked cruise liner the MS Achille Lauro in 1985.

2007

At least 200,000 demonstrators in Ankara, Turkey protest against the possible candidacy of incumbent Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoðan.