

Pahela Baishakh passes as the day of oneness

Let it rejuvenate our spirit all year long

A Son every year, this year, too, on Pahela Boishakh, thousands of people came together in a spirit of festivity to usher in the Bangla Nabobarsho or new year. The first of Boishakh is the day when people, irrespective of faith, class, age, sex or any other difference, converged on the basis of cultural harmony.

It is the day when businesses closed off the past year's accounts with the ending of the old *Haal Khata* and opening of a new one, and the day when farmers take stock of crops. Though this may have been the case historically, Pahela Boishakh is no longer celebrated for its economic significance alone, though it now gives a further boost to the economy with the buying and selling of new clothes and gifts akin to a nationwide fair! Today, it is the largest cultural festival in which Bangalis take part, clad in white and red, losing themselves in a myriad of other colours of festoons, masks and handicrafts.

This year, too, the whole nation, was a vibrant, pulsating image of colour and song. Neither the Ramna Batamul blasts of 2001 nor the current shadow of political instability and communal tension could stop the thousands of Bangalis from welcoming the first light of day with Chhayanaut's *Barshoboron* in the capital's Ramna Batamul or participating in the *Mongol Shobha Jatra*, the colourful procession brought out by students and teachers of the Faculty of Fine Arts of Dhaka University.

Amidst it all, there were the handful of Islamic scholars who, as always, claimed that the new year celebrations go against Muslim values. This bigoted view does not help the discourse; on the contrary, it creates confusion as well as weakens us. Just as we imbibe Islamic values so also are we proud of our Bengali heritage. Any dichotomy and conflictual perception of the two prevent us from taking a collective comprehensive view of our cultural heritage. That is where our pride lies and that is what shines the path to progress.

The growing pile at Chittagong port

Hartal and work abstention must come to an end

THERE is a growing pile, 12 lakh tonnes of goods to be precise, at the Chittagong port. The goods are waiting to be unloaded with the result of extracting demurrage charge of \$14,000 per day overstayed. To add to the strike of water transport workers, the weekly *hartals* called by different political parties have made the pile of sugar, wheat, lentil, salt, fertiliser, cement, clinker and limestone grow at an alarming rate.

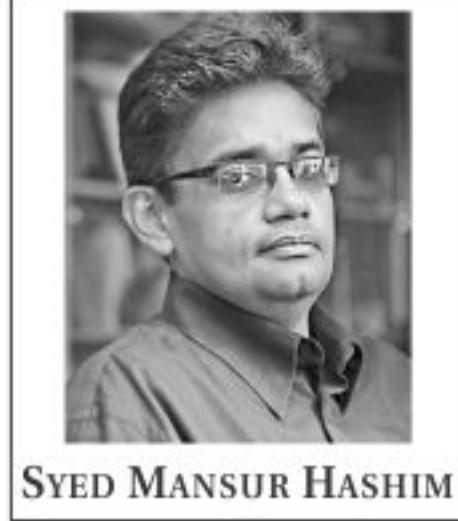
The gluts of goods do not just affect the businessmen who are importing these products from outside, these affect us all. With the backlog in unloading these goods, the market prices of certain essential products are going up and we still have to buy our sugar and cement as our need is the only thing that's remaining constant.

The bottom line is, all involved in the supply chain here are disadvantaged. The businessmen paying large sums of unpredicted fees, the workers working extra to not earn more but to carry bigger weights, the consumer coughing up extra takas, as the dysfunctional situation at the port earns it a bad name.

Perhaps it is time that the importers, the water transport workers and the port authority start thinking outside the box. Yes, they may have little control of the weekly political strikes but they can come to an understanding to end the water transport workers' strike who have demanded a raise, especially when there is no end in sight of sudden *hartal* calls by political parties.

Often if the system is breaking, the solution does not necessarily lie in fixing all the parts, that is a bigger task to take on in the present context. However, partial solution by fixing the parts which are controllable and hope for the rest to fall into places one by one, can prove to be an effective strategy to meet a contingency.

The rocky road ahead



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

THE latest World Bank study titled 'Bangladesh Development Update 2012' points out opportunities and caveats for development.

Indeed, the country has a lot going for it despite problems associated with a possible backlash from compliance issues in the United States, particularly labour safety issues; the uncertainties revolving around the reopening of traditional labour markets in the Mid-East and the volatility resulting from sustained political agitation.

If one looks at the data presented, Bangladesh has effectively brought 15 million people, or about a tenth of its population out of abject poverty over the last decade (2001-2010). The preceding decade saw a reduction of only 2.3 million people. In terms of achieving millennium development goals, the country is on track to achieve 11 (3 already achieved) of the 28 set. The country has been highlighted as one of the 18 "highlighted" countries in the South that have made significant gains on the Human Development Index over a two-decade period. A figure that is much higher than the preceding decade.

Getting back to the issue of boosting employment, the possibilities are there in the near-term. Should Bangladesh get its act together, it could potentially tap into job creation for an additional 15 million people over the next decade. As stated in the policy document, "China will outsource 80 million jobs in the labour-intensive manufacturing sector in the next 10 years. Bangladesh has potential to grab 15 million of them. If it fails, the 10 emerging economies out of the Next 11 will bag the jobs."

For such a scenario to materialise conditions for faster growth of productive jobs (outside of agriculture), particularly in the manufacturing and service sectors will have to be created. This claim is supported by the McKinsey/USAID report which por-

trays that Bangladesh workers' productivity is at par with the Chinese.

Yet, to attract the significant investments that will generate these millions of new jobs, policymakers will have to address some key issues in the immediate future. The lack of industrial zoning (SEZ) remains a major bottleneck. Estimates show that 40,000 acres of land for SEZs will have to be made available to facilitate establishment of industrial units over the next decade.

Some of the land could be acquired from idle state-owned enterprises. Policy guidelines are required to make this happen. Trade financing remains significantly high in comparison to other countries in the region. Suggestions have been made to the establishment of a dedicated bank to start "competitive trade finance in Bangladesh" as has happened in the case of other Asian countries like India and China. The dilapidated condition of infrastructure, particularly in terms of power and road transportation has capped foreign investments in the past and present alike.

The inordinately long tendering process for getting projects off the ground has served as a choking point to getting key projects off the ground in a timely fashion. Some major rethinking along the lines of "Public Private Partnership" could help cut through the red tape that is at present preventing development of much needed infrastructure. Last but not the least, the "one-stop service" of Board of Investment has to be given expanded authority to play its rightful role in promoting Bangladesh as a favourite investment destination. At present it serves little role beyond registering new investors' intent on investing in the country.

Breaking through the investment trap remains one of the biggest challenges for the government. The conditions are all there for the country to take that big chunk of Chinese jobs that is definitely going to be outsourced. As pointed out rightly by the WB study, "Bangladesh is poised to exploit the long-awaited 'demographic dividend' with a rising share

Issues of labour unions and workers' safety threaten to impede Bangladesh apparel industry's entry into international markets as major buyers begin to reduce their exposure to the country's RMG sector.



TON RAHMANN/DPA NEWS

of its working-age population. Its growing and abundant labour force is highly underutilised. On the other hand Bangladesh's competitors are becoming expensive places in which to do business."

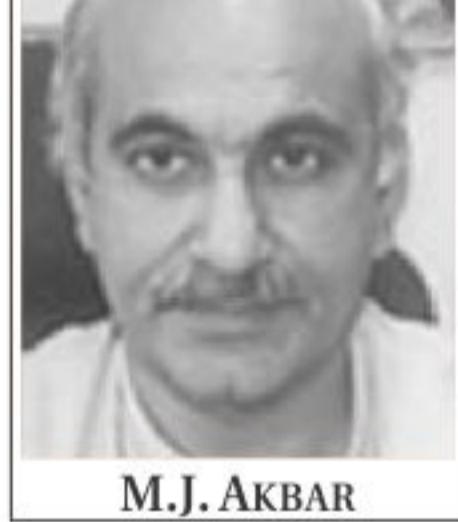
One must not forget the fact that Bangladesh was able to sustain GDP growth rates in the vicinity of 6% for the past decade or so, thanks primarily to strong inward remittances and a vibrant export-oriented readymade garments (RMG) sector. Today, both these sectors are under severe pressure. Traditional labour markets in the Mid-East like Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates remain "on-hold" as regulators have largely failed to tackle the illegalities surrounding private sector operators' activities in exporting manpower. The issues of labour unions and workers' safety threaten to impede Bangladesh apparel industry's entry into international markets as major buyers like Wal-Mart, Tesco

Corp, etc. begin to reduce their exposure to the country's RMG sector as highlighted by *Wall Street Journal* in its 'Bangladesh Unrest Threatens its Boom.'

Some of the challenges presented here can be mitigated provided a pragmatic approach to problem solving is adopted today and not tomorrow or next year. In the present, political volatility remains as a major threat. The political unrest that has gripped the country and brought productive activities to its knees must also be addressed. With both political alliances firmly entrenched on battling it out on the streets, rather than haggling over the negotiating table, the economy is headed into uncharted territory. Political stability remains a primary prerequisite to the smooth functioning of any economy and Bangladesh is no exception.

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BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

Off with his head? Hardly

AT long last we have an Indian Marie Antoinette. The Bourbon queen before the French Revolution of 1789 began to dislocate royal heads from their shoulders, imperiously asked citizens hungry for common bread to eat cake instead. Ajit Pawar's recipe for Maharashtra's farmers suffering from the worst drought in decades is not quite as delicious, but it has already earned pride of place in the political thesaurus of memorable insults. There is nothing like bodily fluids to stoke conversation in a thirsty teashop.

Ajit Pawar is no fool; far from it. Why would he taunt stricken farmers who have loyally voted for his party with an analogy one would be loath to suggest in the privacy of a drawing room? No one in his senses tells a public rally, not to mention subsequent multitudes on media, that he can do little about falling water levels in dams since urinating into them won't help.

This sort of intemperate outburst speaks of some deep frustration. What made Ajit Pawar stupid on such an epic scale? As he pointed out, rationally, he could not be blamed for dry skies; he is merely deputy chief minister of Maharashtra, not deputy chief god of Heaven. The reason for this rant lies elsewhere: guilt.

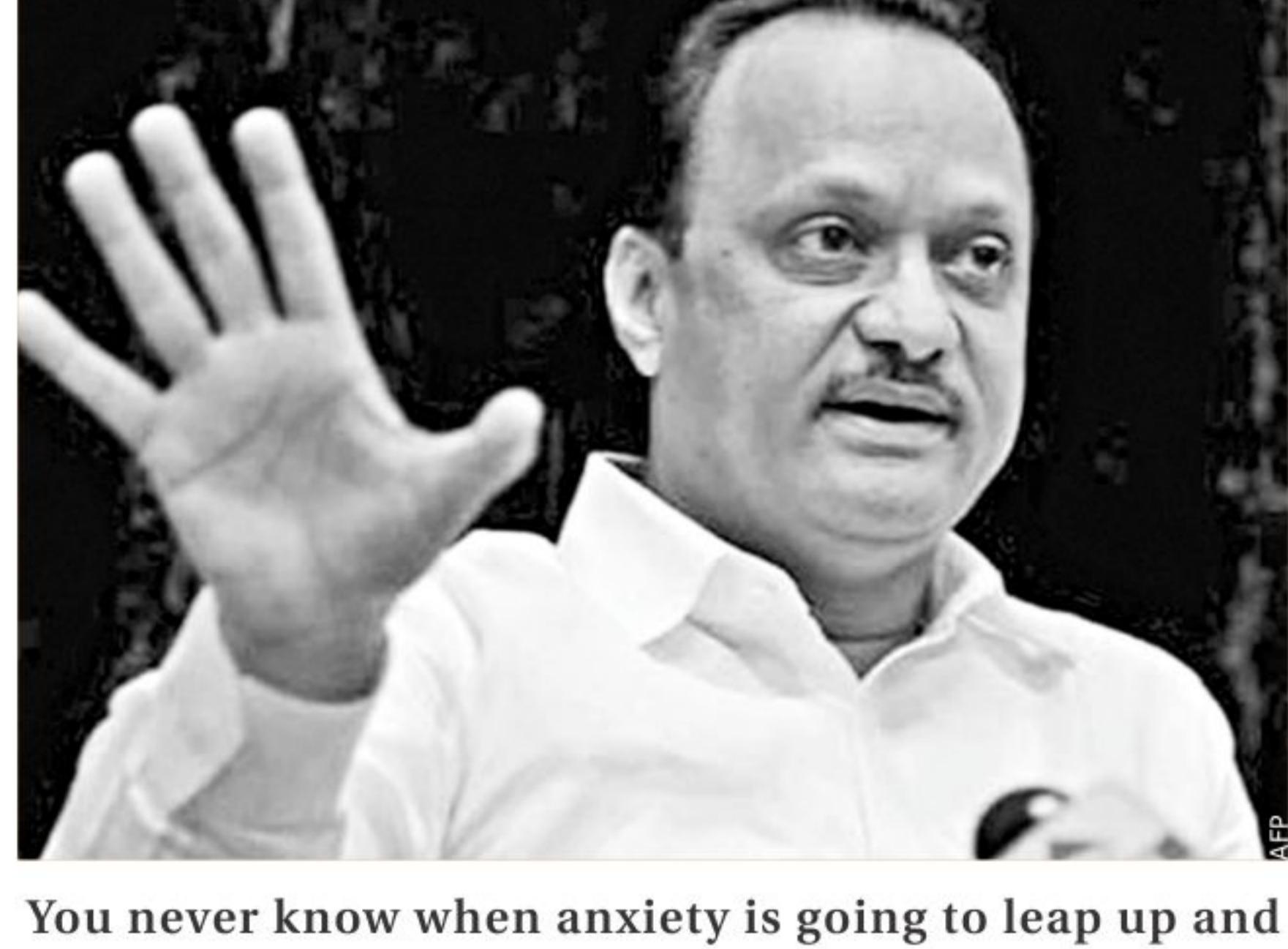
Over the last decade, Ajit Pawar has ripped through a cumulative fund of Rs.70,000 croreeyes, you read the figure rightmean for irrigation projects designed to protect the state's farmers from such vagaries of nature as drought. Much of this money disappeared in the usual dark hole through which cash is siphoned off: project cost escalation. The water saved through the dams that were built did not reach

cation for fiscal appeasement, enabled Ajit Pawar to return to his old office. Story over.

Or not quite. You never know when anxiety, lurking in some shadow of the subconscious, is going to leap up and distort your tongue. The deepest wounds in politics are self-inflicted. When Pawar addressed that rally, he must have seen votes being lost on the face of his audience. Then he lost it.

The pundits of Mumbai are already doing long division on their calculators to assess the political cost of Ajit Pawar's urine therapy. One measure of the damage can be gauged from the flurry of apologies. Ajit Pawar did not actually hold his ears, put on a dunce cap and stand in the corner, but he did readily admit that this was the biggest blunder of his career.

Contribution rarely compensates fully



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for injury; Pawar's impulsive snarl was thought, regret was very much an afterthought. His dilemma is compounded by the fact that the shadow of this drought falls across party strongholds.

Almost 75% of uncle and patriarch Sharad Pawar's constituency, Madha, is affected and there is already talk of destitution suicides. Insensitivity in times of distress is not easily erased

from voter memory.

The conventional analysis was, till recently, that even if Congress suffered because of rising prices and corruption in the next general election, Sharad Pawar would minimise his own accountability by some nimble footwork. That certainty has been punctured. It is not beyond repair, but Pawar will require a very long needle and some strong yarn to stitch this one back into shape.

Sharad Pawar does not slip easily in Maharashtra. He has worked hard in his state and been astute in Delhi politics, sliding alongside BJP when Atal Behari Vajpayee was prime minister and standing solidly by Dr. Manmohan Singh when fortunes shifted.

Parties come and go; Sharad Pawar stays in power forever, thanks to his fine nose, which can smell the wind from afar. But when you have been too long in office you can miss something far closer, the straw piling up, strand by strand, on the camel's back. An insult can so easily become the last straw.

The French Revolution, like any historic occurrence, offers more than one instructive anecdote. Marie Antoinette's husband, Louis XVI, who lost his mind long before he lost his head to the guillotine, heard the mobs in July 1789, when Paris stormed the Bastille prison, and asked his courtier Francois Alexander Frederic, duke of Liancourt and grandmaster of the wardrobe, "So what is it? A riot?" The duke replied, doubtless in silken tones, "No sir, it is a revolution." But Louis' diary entry for July 14, the day Paris changed the world, consisted of just one word: "Nothing." The heights of power are not always the best perch for a cool look when anger is sweeping past your door.

M.J. Akbar is editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, *India on Sunday*, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY April 16

1178 BC

The calculated date of the Greek king Odysseus' return home from the Trojan War.

1919

Gandhi organizes a day of "prayer and fasting" in response to the killing of Indian protesters in the Amritsar Massacre by the British.

1945

More than 7,000 die when the German refugee ship Goya is sunk by a Soviet submarine torpedo.

1947

Bernard Baruch coins the term "Cold War" to describe the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union.

1963

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. pens his Letter from Birmingham Jail while incarcerated in Birmingham, Alabama for protesting against segregation.

2001

India and Bangladesh begin a five-day border conflict, but are unable to resolve the disputes about their border.