

A day of colour and verve

Let's celebrate and draw inspiration from it

PAHELA Baishakh, the first day of Bangla new year, marks a renewal of our bonding to our cultural heritage. It provides a powerful impetus to seek a new dawn collectively as a nation. Symbolically, the observance of the day signifies living with the nature, be alive to seasonal variations and, above all, greet the new with hopes for a better future.

The tradition of Pahela Baishakh is rooted in the Mughal era when emperor Jalaluddin Mohammad Akbar introduced it to smoothen agriculture tax collection. So, there is a link to productivity. In business terms, it coincides with the opening of Halkhata, the new book of accounts drawing a balance sheet of the year gone by.

Celebrations and festivities comprising distribution of sweets, organising of fairs to showcase the best of crafts and staging of musical soirees are parts of the day's spectacular eventful observance.

Our Bengaliness finds a heart warming expression through a cultural bonding and pristine love and attachment to our way of life. It is truly an occasion to which all people, irrespective of religion, caste creed and societal strata can relate to and be imbued with its inherent spirit.

The day also opens up a groundswell of creative energy with the result that many new products and fashions crop up doing brisk business in the process. It is good for the economy as it is also soul-soothing to our mundane existence.

Shuvo Nababarsho to all.

Old Dhaka's looming peril

Remove the chemical warehouses immediately

FROM a report carried in this newspaper, the old part of the capital is sitting on a powder keg waiting to explode, given the large number of chemical warehouses and shops still operating in the area. Adding to the prospect of accident is that the premises of many of these stores and shops are being used as hospitals and other public utilities.

We seem to become active only after a serious disaster strikes us as evident from the fact that the Nimtoli area, where a serious fire in 2010 caused in a chemical warehouse that took the life of 123 people, has now been freed of shops and stores containing flammable chemicals. The interesting aspect is that the relocation has been done entirely on the initiative of the public, and that begs the question.

Apparently, the government's action is limited only to setting up a committee to address the issue. Nothing palpable has been done as yet since the decision to shift the chemical warehouses from the residential areas was taken in 2011. Surely, an issue of public safety cannot be hamstrung by bureaucratic inertia. It would be pertinent to ask whether the ministry has set a time for the said committee to complete its tasks of removing the warehouses that pose danger to public safety.

But while the matter of relocation will take time to implement the city corporation in the meanwhile must ensure that the prospect of accidents is reduced as much as possible by taking all possible safety measures.

Make taxi fare attractive

RIDWAN QUAIUM

ONE may think that since there isn't any quality public transport or quality para-transit available in Dhaka, people will still use the new yellow taxi cab, even though the fare has been set at an extremely high rate, due to inelastic demand -- which means that demand of a product or service is not sensitive to the price. However, this may not be the case because the rate is set so high that, considering the purchasing power of the residents of Dhaka, majority of the people may not be able to afford it even though it is supposed to be much safer and more reliable.

One may also think that the service is aimed at the affluent of the society, but they already have personal vehicles. Therefore, the taxi service may not attract them also. Most people may use the taxi service only during the day when they really do not have any other option or late at night when they need security. For most people of the society taxi service is an elastic demand, meaning that they will use the service more if the fare decreases and use the service less if it increases. As of now, the taxi fare is even higher than the taxi fare in Bangkok, though the purchasing power of the people in Bangkok is much higher than the purchasing power of the people in Dhaka.

To make the service affordable and acceptable to the public it is important that the taxi fare be set considering the purchasing power of the residents of the city, and after comparing with the taxi fares of other cities in the region. There is no question that Dhaka lacks a quality public transport and quality para-transit, and resetting the taxi fare for the new yellow cabs so that it is affordable to the majority of the residents will certainly give the city residents a quality option to commute within the city.

The writer is a Transport Engineer.

Bust the syndicate

KALEIDOSCOPE



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

IT is good to know that the education ministry, as well as the Dhaka Education Board, has decided to investigate the widespread allegations about the leaking of English second paper questions for the ongoing Higher Secondary Examinations (HSC) under the Dhaka Education Board. We would like to hope that these investigation committees, as before, will not end up being just probe for probe's sake without the public ever knowing their outcome or any action taken to hold the culprits involved to account. Moreover, we would like to be reassured by Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid's word that this time he would do whatever is needed to get to the root of the scam. So far so good. Even so, there still will be the skeptics, given the previous records of inaction. So, we should not blame the examinees, or their guardians, if they take the probes initiated by the education ministry and the Dhaka Education Board with a grain of salt. The reasons are obvious.

The contents of English first paper were also leaked in the same manner before April 8, the day that the exam was held. But the authorities did not take those reports seriously. Even before that, exams of Bangla first and second papers were equally tainted by similar reports of question leakage. Police even arrested a number of people involved in the unfair practice, from Brahmanbaria and Sherpur, and recovered copies of question papers along with answers for Bangla first paper (set "ka") from photocopiers in those districts. These glaring instances notwithstanding, the education ministry dismissed those as rumour.

The Dhaka Education Board was equally nonchalant during the SSC exams in February last year. During that time, copies of leaked mathematics question were not only sold in different districts, photographs of those questions were also published in the media. But for reasons best known to them, the authorities did not take serious note of the reports.

Again, when the attention of the Dhaka Board authority was drawn to the leaked mathematics and English second paper questions for Junior School Certificate (JSC) exams held in last November, it even argued that those were not leaked questions, but 'short suggestions,' provided by some very expert and experienced teachers on the subjects in question.

As it stands, in most of the cases of question leakage

from primary to higher secondary level examinations, the education ministry as well as the Board seemed to have taken a 'couldn't care less' attitude, despite the fact that the culprits involved in copying and distribution of leaked questions were caught in the act by the police in different places. In some cases, the probes the ministry or the Board had conducted were not followed by punitive action against those found involved in the scams. Surprisingly though, there are clear provisions of the law enacted in 1980, and its amended version of 1992, for prosecution and punishment of persons committing such crimes involving public examinations. But no serious efforts were taken to arrest and give exemplary punishment to those who are destroying the country's public examination system.

But why the board or the ministry had taken such a strange stance on the previous cases of question paper leakage in public exams is anybody's guess.

Serious doubts, therefore, naturally arise. Why is this inexplicable sloth or lethargy in the education administration to deal with the curse of question leakage with an iron fist? Clearly, there is a strong syndicate involved whose tentacles are spread throughout the entire system of examination, from the stage of selecting the question papers to printing and distribution of those to different examination centres. And with the advent of latest communication and recording technologies like mobile phone and internet, the traditional methods to keep the process secret and secure have become redundant. The examination authorities must take these vulnerabilities of the existing security regime into account before devising any failsafe strategy to stop the

leakage.

The recent incidents of information leakage from every conceivable system of examination or test to judge the merits of students seeking higher studies or candidates willing to get a new job or a promotion to a higher position in a service have broken all previous records. As a result, the examination system itself is teetering on the brink of collapse. And it has only destroyed the students' faith in the examination system.

Can we assume that the education ministry has finally realised that things are going beyond control? We hope it is such a sense of urgency that has propelled it to form a committee to investigate the English paper II leakage case. So, a word of caution. It cannot be hoped that the racket or syndicate behind the question paper leakage can be busted by arresting one or two petty criminals working at the fringe of the network. The authorities should be prepared to hit at the base of the evil syndicate. And the base, they must know, pervades the entire system.

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BJP's true colours

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

WHEN the Emergency was imposed in 1975 and fundamental rights were suspended, the vast majority of Indian intellectuals and commentators protested. Most newspapers carried sharply critical comments and truthful accounts of the excesses perpetrated to defend India against contrived "threats." Many critics were arrested or sacked.

In contrast to this stands the near-euphoric reception being accorded by much of the media to the emerging Right-wing threat from the Bharatiya Janata

Party's (BJP) prime ministerial-aspirant Narendra Modi, and worse, rationalisations for him by certain "liberal" columnists, who held him culpable for Gujarat's 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom.

Today, they are trimming their sails to the wind -- and playing to the pro-Modi gallery. They see virtue in him, including "moderation." An analyst recently lavished praise on him for not highlighting trade-mark Hindutva issues: Ram temple at Ayodhya, abrogation of Article 370 pertaining to Kashmir, and a Uniform Civil Code.

The BJP's 2014 election manifesto now shatters these delusions. The "Trident" issues figure in it just as they did in all its manifestos since 1996 (barring 1999, when the BJP-led coalition issued a "National Agenda for Governance," which opportunistically omitted them.)

The past manifestos termed "Sanatana Dharma" synonymous with "nationalism," declared "Shri Ram lies at the core of Indian consciousness," and equated "the Hindu world view" with "cultural nationalism."

The new manifesto is no different, despite minor changes like building a Ram temple "within the constitutional framework," and a UCC with "gender equality." It lifts entire sections from Mr. Modi's recent "Vision" document and the Gujarat-2012 Assembly manifesto: it's a manifesto "for, by and of Modi."

This shows the BJP remains firmly in Hindutva's vicious grip. The RSS has tightened its hold on its day-to-day working, organisational appointments and ticket distribution as never before. L.K. Advani wouldn't have been compelled to stand from Gandhinagar had the RSS chief not intervened.

The RSS is fully complicit in Mr. Modi's plans to weed out everyone associated with the Vajpayee legacy. Mr. Advani stands utterly marginalised. The Gujarat BJP's huge posh new headquarters has rooms for national and state office-bearers, a media centre, meeting rooms, an auditorium, a 120-seat conference hall, a library, etc, but no room for Gandhinagar MP Advani!

As for those who see "moderation" in Mr. Modi's team, his right-hand man Amit Shah recently spewed communal venom and called for "revenge" at Shamli and Muzaffarnagar, worst-affected in last September's anti-Muslim riots that left 60 dead and thousands homeless. One hopes the Election Commission will exemplarily punish Mr. Shah.

Those who have gone soft on Mr. Modi advance two other arguments. First, they point to the BJP's internal "checks and balances," including presence of the Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh chief ministers, and elected party committees.

Mr. Modi has taken care not to antagonise these. The BJP, the apologists claim, is more democratic than the dynasty-controlled Congress, and parties centred around

one or two leaders.

This view is partly true, but dangerously one-sided. Most parties other than the Communists don't hold genuine internal elections. The Congress works more through nomination-from-above than election-from-below. They all do internal consultation. But that doesn't make the BJP a "bottom-up" party.

What makes the BJP truly different is RSS control of it. And the RSS is not an elected body. All its office-bearers from the *sarasanghachalak* downwards are nominated. It calls the shots in the BJP.

It's the RSS that asked Mr. Advani to resign after his 2005 speech extolling Jinnah, and later sacked him as opposition leader in the Lok Sabha. BJP President Rajnath Singh owes his position to the RSS. The RSS nominated Mr. Modi as PM-candidate.

Mr. Modi today needs BJP and non-BJP regional leaders to win votes and build alliances, but he will treat them like dirt once they have served their purpose. Mr. Modi is incurably authoritarian and brooks no dissent. The RSS is with him, and the BJP lists "Modimantra" as its website's topmost "core issue."

RSS control apart, elected BJP bodies like the 12-member parliamentary board and the 19-member central election committee are regularly bypassed on crucial decisions -- like Mr. Jaswant Singh's removal from the Barmer seat. So much for "checks and balances"!

Another line of defence of the Modi apologists compares him with "tough" (read, semi-autocratic) ultra-nationalistic leaders of other countries, like Japan's Shinzo Abe, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

All these leaders are intolerant, advocate cultural exceptionalism and wish to avenge real or imagined past humiliation. They are all staunchly pro-Big Business.

Their relative "popularity" in their "democratic" home countries, the apologists hold, is a new regional/global trend. So there's nothing particularly odious about Mr. Modi. If Mr. Abe represents "Asian nationalism," so does Mr. Modi, who resents the West's denial of a visa to him.

These comparisons are deeply uncomplimentary. All three leaders are authoritarian Right-wing hyper-nationalists, suspicious of democratic institutions (in Mr. Abe's case, even Japan's pacifist Constitution). The last two have sent their economies into a tailspin despite early growth and huge natural wealth. They are extremely divisive.

Mr. Abe is no "Asian nationalist," but an apologist for Japan's imperial past, which he wants to recreate by militarising Japan and confronting its neighbours, especially China, with territorial claims. He is post-War Japan's most Right-wing conservative leader -- to be opposed, not extolled. He's also strongly pro-US. Mr. Modi too is pro-US and will strengthen "strategic partnership" and economic ties with it despite visa-related personal resentment.

Ukraine is Mr. Putin's foreign policy disaster. Blatant Western intervention there must be deplored. But Mr. Putin overreacted by annexing 4.5% of Ukrainian territory. He has gutted his own plans for a Russia-led "Eurasian Union" and sent Ukraine into the European Union's arms. His policies and corruption are causing a massive exodus of talented youth and capital flight.

The less said about Mr. Erdogan's repression of peaceful protests, divisive ethnic impact, media clampdown, massive corruption, and the gathering economic crisis, the better.

India will be hopefully spared the Japanese-Russian-Turkish experience -- and a Modi prime ministership.

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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MH370: Search for elusive 'pings'

This refers to the report, "MH370: Elusive 'pings' keep search in limbo" (April 9). On and off, there are reports that the elusive pings of the black box of the ill-fated plane have been heard. The search has entered the second month but still there has been no seabed search to find out the last resting place of the MH370 flight. This is the most expensive search running into millions of dollars per day by a number of countries like Australia, China, UK and India.

Latest reports say that an Australian ship has relocated more underwater signals and the confirmation may take weeks. The mysterious disappearance of the flight has raised more issues for safety measures. It is a big challenge for modern technology to locate the debris of the plane. An underwater search should have been taken jointly by technologically advanced nations like the USA, China and Russia. Even the space agencies like NASA, European Space Agency and the Japanese one should assist in finding the wreckage of MH370.

Deendayal M. Lulla
Mumbai, India

Time to bury the controversy

This refers to the report, "Mujib 'illegal' PM in 1972 (TDS 10th April). Tarique claimed that Bangabandhu returned to Bangladesh on Pakistani passport. He also quoted the stipulation in the declaration of independence about Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remaining president "until the adoption of a constitution." The attitude taken by TDS editor (Do we have to swallow such rubbish? - TDS, April 4) in this controversy, on the other hand, is most laudable. He has restated the truth about who actually proclaimed 'independence'.

What should grieve every sensible person is that blind zealots have turned Mujib and Zia into rivals, which they were not. One begot the country; the other nursed it. Zia had vision. His effort created SAARC that catapulted the new born country into instant fame. The present prime minister, also daughter of Bangabandhu, is doing him great disservice by trying to inflate him. That automatically makes him controversial as people are tempted to puncture the balloon. Now what is needed is to bury the controversy.

S. G. Jilane
Staten Island, New York, US

Save a teacher's life

My friend Mushfiqur Rahman, the President of Pabna University of Science and Technology Teachers' Association, was attacked at the university gate on March 5 allegedly by some Jamaat-Shibir assailants. The incident was reported in the Prothom Alo of 12th March 2014. But regrettably, the assailants are not yet arrested. Worse still, now the victim is being harassed by local pro-BNP-Jamaat teachers. Even the local AL administration is backing the pro-Jamaat teachers in the university. In this situation, I request the authorities concerned to look into the matter and save a teacher's life.

Tinku
Pabna

Comments on news report, "Mujib 'illegal' PM in 1972," published on April 10, 2014

Kumrul Hasan

He badly needs mental treatment.

Monju Huq

"Little learning is dangerous" -- has again been proved very right by Tarique.

Taufiq

Does this guy desperately need some attention, no matter by which means? If not, then why is he not raising his voice against so many serious issues the country is facing now instead of making ridiculous claims, making himself a laughing stock to the entire nation, bringing embarrassment to his supporters?

Akhtar Shah

What amazes me is that; the audience is sat there silently listening to this utter drive! About the fellow, if he had any brains, he would be dangerous! He is in a big hole and digging down faster with his own shovel!

Vikram Khan

Now it's crystal clear to me what kind of 'medical problem' Tarique is suffering from -- brain death.

A freedom fighter

This guy needs some treatment for mental disability.

"BNP in the political doldrums" (April 10, 2014)

S. M. Iftekhar Ahmed

A very good write-up. Honestly speaking, neither party is fit to rule this land; thanks to their outdated leadership. All BNP had to do was sever ties with a fanatical organisation