

# The moral wish list

## SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

**W**ITH time the Pahela Baisakh festivities in Bangladesh have assumed a grand and massive scale, as if people are making a bold statement about the country's secular "Bangali" orientation. This year,

especially, the celebrations brought a joyous relief after months of political tension. And that is how it should be, since traditionally the New Year is the harbinger of "new beginnings."

However, as I watched the noboborsho festivities, it occurred to me that the focus has gradually shifted to the materialistic aspects of the occasion — food, fashion and commercially competing cultural programs. We rekindle the spirit of Pahela Baisakh by singing *Esho he baishakh* almost like a mantra. But not many of us focus on the core message of the song... bathing the earth in flames so that it is cleansed of all impurities. A better world through the baptism of fire. Unfortunately, our current preoccupation with material success makes us forget that a better world can only be created through the redemptive power of human love and caring.

We applaud people on their past year's successes -- accelerated promotions or lucrative business deals. Seldom do we recognize individuals for their moral and spiritual accomplishments. The news and media devote banner lines to high academic achievers, start-up venture capitalists and successful business entrepreneurs. But we fail to eulogize the person who picked up a dying man hit by a bus and took him to the hospital, or saved a woman from being assaulted by rapists or rescued the worker buried under the rubble of a collapsed garment factory. Yet, we all recognise that our greatest challenge is the moral bankruptcy that plagues our society. Then, why do these noble people who render selfless social service remain unsung heroes? Is it because most of us have been conditioned to undermine the meritocracy

of moral values as compared to material success?

The obsession with material success is surprising given that the virtues we remember about people when they are no longer with us are love, kindness and selflessness. How many times have we heard a memorial speech where someone was remembered because he became the vice-president of a company in record time? Very few. But we invariably reminisce about a person's positive character traits -- the capacity to love selflessly or to defend what is

morally right. These attributes are what hold us together in challenging times.

When we see these qualities in others, we are inspired and become more aware of what we can do toward building a better and balanced world.

Let I sound vague let me elucidate my point with a mundane example. Recently, while vacationing in India, I visited Tipu Sultan's Summer Palace in Srirangapatna near Mysore. Painted on its wall was a detailed scene of the last and decisive battle fought between Tipu and the combined forces of the Nizam of Hyderabad and the

East India Company in 1799. The Battle was momentous in its historic impact since it was a heroic example of an Indian king resisting the British occupation. At the battle's climax, Tipu Sultan was betrayed by one of his confidants and killed. The images of Tipu fighting valiantly on his elephant created a deep impression on my mind. It was a stark reminder of how one of the last independent monarchs of the subcontinent fought and died for his freedom. The magnificence and opulence of the other palaces and monuments I visited paled in comparison to the intensity of the emotion that Tipu's bravery evoked....

On Pahela Baisakh, while reflecting on my life, I was reminded once again of Tipu's lone struggle for freedom and the power of moral accomplishment as opposed to material achievements. I realised that the people I most admire are the ones that touch me with kindness, move me with their selfless spirit or have the courage to fight for a right cause. That's how I want to be remembered too. Unfortunately, I have not yet achieved the generosity of character that can make a difference in the lives of others. And when I am in a pensive mood I am overcome by the morbid thought that people may find it hard to expound my virtues when they remember me after my death. But, can I make the quantum leap from a self-centred existence to becoming a giving and selfless human being? Or have I become too comfortable with my moral mediocrity?

The least I can do is to answer my inner calling to create a meaningful life. It won't be easy because building a strong character is far more difficult than building a successful career. For, building character will entail a constant struggle between my external environment and my actual self. And I may stumble -- but will I fall? I will know next year on Pahela Baishakh. And that is what Pahela Baishakh will mean to me -- the day I assess my moral accomplishments against my material achievements...

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank. E-mail: shiftingimages@gmail.com



# FORGING Unity

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

**W**HEN two Indian passenger ships carrying 337 Bangladeshi nationals, who were pulled out of war-torn Yemen, reached the southern Indian port city of Kochi on April 18, it marked the high-point of cooperation and coordination among the South Asian countries in a crisis situation of global proportion.

Both China and Pakistan have also staged the evacuation of people seeking to get out of Yemen but India's has been the biggest rescue exercise with the deployment of its naval and merchant ships and civilian and air force aircraft in a well-coordinated operation. Three naval ships, two merchant vessels, chartered Air India planes and two large transport aircrafts of the Indian Air Force were involved to pull out more than 5000 people from Yemen. The operation--primarily a diplomatic and humanitarian exercise--was coordinated by a task force that worked out of the tiny African country, Djibouti.

The major chunk of those evacuated was no doubt Indian nationals--over 4,000 of them--but the Indian effort also helped people from more than two dozen other countries, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and the US, the Netherlands and Pakistan. Pakistan has, in turn, taken 11 Indians along with their nationals and flew the Indians by a special aircraft to India. Neither India nor Pakistan had made any request to each other for evacuating their nationals from Yemen and yet when the crunch hour came, they did.

The world has appreciated India's ability to move so many people out of a war-ravaged country. More importantly, it has shown how a situation of crisis opens up opportunities for cooperation among countries, despite differences among them on other issues.

The larger message of India's evacuation is, however, for countries in South and South East Asia, the two regions which had earlier commended the assistance of the Indian Navy at the time of the Tsunami in December 2004. Whether it is cyclone, earthquake, tidal waves or other forms of humanitarian crisis, India, despite its limited resources with crew and material, has been in the forefront of leading cooperative efforts in the regions. Adversity brings out the best side of every country, as they help each other irrespective of their differences on a host of other issues. This may sound like mere posturing but in reality, global crises do need countries to come together and work together on joint solutions.

If the evacuation from Yemen once again shows India as an emerging power in Indian Ocean region, it also underlines that to be more effective on a larger scale, India needs a much stronger navy and air force not just for military operations but to respond to humanitarian crisis and ensure peaceful coexistence, trade and commerce in the region in the face of sea piracy and narco-terrorism. This was evident when the Indian navy had joined international efforts to counter Somali pirates a few years ago.

In the case of Yemen, India had struggled initially for some days to scale up its rescue efforts and had to hire a ship to evacuate its nationals from the port of Aden as fighting escalated there. While Air India planes were positioned in Oman, Yemen's next door neighbour, India found it impossible to negotiate the opening of a safe air corridor with Saudi Arabia. However, things got moving with the deployment of junior Minister for External Affairs V K Singh to Djibouti, on the other side of the Gulf of Aden, from where Indian Air Force C-17 transporters picked up evacuees brought out by Air India from Aden and flying them home.

Coming back to implications of India's evacuation efforts, the question that naturally crops up is: should South Asian countries require a common crisis situation for their nationals in a far-away land to help each other? If a war or a natural disaster can act as glue for them to help each other, why can't they do the same at other times? Why should it require adversity, and not common prosperity, to forge unity among the countries? After all, all kinds of situations touch human lives.

The writer is a Delhi-based journalist.

# The Sound of Silence

ANDREW EAGLE

**S**OLITUDE or loneliness, quiet reflection and public interaction: are experiences of these feelings and moments innate or cultural? Australia versus Bangladesh might provide answers...

Many years ago, with work colleagues I was camping beside a rural beach in New South Wales. I don't recall which one -- the beaches are many; but there were long empty sand stretches and kangaroos hopping around the campsite behind the dunes. In the evening we kindled the obligatory campfire. There was singing.

Our singing can't have been award-winning because one of my colleagues, Fleur Thwaites, came to recall an earlier episode when after several songs another camper had yelled out to her and her friends, "Don't you know the sound of silence?"

They must've been a quick-witted bunch because after taking in the complaint they launched into a new song. "Hello darkness my old friend, I've come to talk to you again..." It was the folk song, "The Sound of Silence" by Simon and Garfunkel. They did well to remember the lyrics.

Australia is sparsely populated. Even within Sydney's vast spread there are national parks: silence is easy to find. Australians grow up enjoying that, finding a rock to sit on in bushland overlooking a valley, for example, to watch and breathe and think.

Bangladesh is another story. Although talkative types are found beyond the country's borders in Bangladesh there's quite often at least one about, seemingly ready to verbalise every thought no matter how trivial. Sometimes it's entertaining. Add the car horns, arguing or joking in the street and the miking announcements... There's no getting around it, most often it's not a

country that's shy of activity.

It takes some getting used to, the being social from the moment you step outdoors -- even in the villages, the random strangers asking sometimes personal questions, the always needing to chat.

Occasionally the old Australian me wishes for a little more reflective space; more often it's the Bangladeshi me that jumps holus-bolus into the social street scene. Bangladesh brims with life.

Nonetheless, I can only laugh when Bangladeshis sometimes ask with concern, "Are you travelling alone?" It's Bangladesh. Alone is a rare probability.

And whereas for Bangladeshis the being alone is most often equated with loneliness, like the complaining camper it is possible sometimes to prefer the sound of silence. Potentially the enjoyment of constant

company is reflected linguistically: think how commonly you hear the word *eka* to mean alone in a negative sense as opposed to *ekakitto* meaning solitude. While in English 'solitude' is also a rarer word, 'alone' is neutral -- as often positive as negative and not equivalent to 'lonely'.

Anecdotally, in the village context I've asked what the Bangla word for solitude was only to get puzzled looks. Perhaps I wasn't explaining it well?

Adjustment is not a one-way street. There are stories now and then of Bangladeshis who have travelled to Australia to study or live only to discover there are not tea stalls every few hundred yards along city streets, that in suburban areas after evening streets are empty.

Such tales of newfound alone-ness seem to end with the Bangladeshi's return to chotpoti-eating, betel-chewing Dhaka.

Whether or not there is more to them than urban legend, one thing is certain: immigrants to Australia from Bangladesh, and similar countries where buying vegetables at eleven at night is not a huge problem, do have adjustments to make. At first the relative silence might seem welcome relief but do they ever get to the stage of truly relishing solitude?

What I do know is that like the newly-arrived Bangladeshi immigrant, these days, like it or not, Sydney's streets must greet me with awkward questions: "Where are all the people? Where is all the noise?" Bangladesh has long since done its work: an energetic streetscape most often brings about a smile.

The writer is a feature writer and English Language trainer at The Daily Star.



*Potentially the enjoyment of constant company is reflected linguistically: think how commonly you hear the word eka to mean alone in a negative sense as opposed to ekakitto meaning solitude.*

## QUOTABLE Quote

*Human rights are not only violated by terrorism, repression or assassination, but also by unfair economic structures that creates huge inequalities.*

Pope Francis

## CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

- ACROSS**
- Surface coating
  - Accomplishment
  - Maine park
  - Be furious
  - Advice to a sinner
  - Pressing need
  - Horri-fied
  - Gorillas and gibbons
  - Chump
  - Arthur of "Maude"
  - Take up arms
  - Hockey great Bobby
  - Stunned wonder
  - Fall mo.
  - More flaky
  - Letter before sigma
  - Patriot Allen
  - "You know you want to!"
  - Sneezer's need
  - Clickable picture
  - One way to shop
  - Warning word
  - Changed
  - Some poetry
  - Furry warps
- DOWN**
- Way off
  - Motel freebie
  - Carpet feature
  - Think tank output
  - Join the choir
  - "Hell--no fury..."
  - Niners' home
  - Soil burrower
  - In the past
  - Wallet bill
  - Showy flower
  - Dwelling
  - Candidate of the '90s
  - Umber of ocher
  - Swaggering
  - "Loot" playwright
  - Needs headway
  - Need to pay
  - Sullies
  - Yo-Yo Ma's instrument
  - Weeps
  - Mile or meter
  - Altar promise
  - New England catch
  - Suffering
  - Maiden name label
  - Harris and Asner



## Yesterday's answer

DIGUP WHIST  
ADORE HANOI  
MEANDMYGIRL  
PAT DON TEE  
BLOOM  
CANOE TULSA  
UNIX SEAL  
TYPES THEME  
DECOY  
ACT ROD ION  
MARLEY AND ME  
SENIOR TOILET  
SIGUE EDENS

## CRYPTOQUOTE

MB QXWW DDR, ZBX GDDR MB IPGR  
QBVDMPKG MB KBTR BG MB, QBVDMPKG  
MB VBMPYCMD ZBX, QBVDMPKGJ MB  
PGQUPND ZBX. -- MBGZ RBNQDMM

**YESTERDAY'S CRYPTOQUOTE: NOT DISTANCE OF PLACE OR LAPSE OF TIME CAN LESSEN THE FRIENDSHIP OF THOSE WHO ARE THOROUGHLY PERSUADED OF EACH OTHER'S WORTH.**

## A XYDLBAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

## BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



## HENRY by Don Trachte

