

Pahela Baishakh

Let it be a harbinger of inclusivity

TODAY we celebrate the first month of the Bengali New Year. Pahela Baishakh, a centuries-old tradition, is as much a part of our cultural identity as well as our national. It is a celebration of colour, folk art, local cuisine and the common heritage of a nation that has survived and thrived on its multiplicity of communities. It unites us beyond our beliefs and politics.

So, it is a sad day when dogmatic views seek to misrepresent an event in the name of belief. Yet, this year too those seeking to make a communal issue out of the celebration are active. A colourful artwork on a wall in Chittagong created as part of Baishakh festivities by students of Institute of Fine Arts of Chittagong University was defaced on Tuesday.

The accusation that celebrations of Baishakh are contradictory to our beliefs clearly speaks of attempts to communalise our nation. It is a blatant disrespect to religions when they are used to create divisions and hostility within a community that has lived and thrived together for hundreds of years. We are worried by such attempts to communalise, and acceding to such attempts for political reasons. Such appeasement of communal concerns cannot bode well for us as a nation or the other communities who call this country their home.

We feel that it is now a duty of our political leaders to take the moral high ground. Pahela Baishakh is an example of how a nation can unite beyond their personal identities. To communalise our cultural traditions forebodes of a time when our history will be discarded and identities will be forged along narrower lines. We urge our readers and our leaders to take time today to appreciate a tradition which revels in overcoming parochial concerns in favour of inclusiveness.

Shubho Nababarsha!

Prices of stents to be fixed

Make post-operative care less expensive too

MOST heart patients in need of angioplasty and stents have been taking the trouble of going to neighbouring India for surgery since the government there fixed the price of stents at Rs 30,000. In our country, however, there is no such thing as having a maximum retail price (MRP) on the various brands of bare-metal stent, which had, till now allowed public and private hospitals to charge any amount they pleased. There have been allegations that the profit mark-up and doctors' commissions for recommending different brands (in the absence of proper government regulation) allowed for price of stents to vary wildly. All that could change now. As per a decision by the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA), patients can now choose which stent they want as there will be MRP and date of expiry printed on the packet.

While all this is very good news provided the DGDA is able to enforce the decision on all importing companies, we should also like to emphasise that post-operative care is just as important as the operation itself for heart patients. Here too, there are major problems as hospitals follow no set rules as to what patients will be charged as they recuperate from surgery. The question of post-operative care and costs involved for any cardiovascular patient need to be rationalised across the board if the health ministry hopes to make qualitative improvements for heart patients. Rationalising prices of stents will go a long way to help people of fixed incomes suffering from heart conditions greatly and it is our hope that authorities concerned will look into rationalisation of other associated services in hospitals too. Only then will the poor truly benefit.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Disturbing trend of violence against children

A report published in this daily revealed that 145 children have been raped in the first three months of this year, and in the first couple of months, 50 children were killed. This points to a disturbing rise of violence and a breakdown of moral values. Given the societal taboo that exists around exposing rape and molestation, there is a strong possibility that a lot of such cases have gone unreported.

Such acts of violence leave children traumatised for life and affect their families as well. They rarely get legal and emotional support, especially in cases where the victim comes from a lower socioeconomic background. There are cases we have never heard of because the families have settled out of court due to societal and/or financial pressure.

We need to make the laws more child-friendly, if exemplary punishment is to be meted out in a short time span so that perpetrators will think twice before committing such heinous crimes. Also, the procedures of investigation need to be reviewed more closely. Assessing circumstantial evidence and conducting DNA testing are essential in order to bring the perpetrator under the purview of law.

Zubair Khaled Huq
Dhaka

Nababarsha in a different tenor



C R ABRAR

PREPARATIONS for the Bengali New Year

festivities are in full swing. The shops are abuzz with patrons looking for red and white attire, the restaurants and eateries are

preparing special menus befitting for the occasion and the cultural activists are busy putting in long hours to organise the *Mongol Shobha Jatra*. When such preparations are in full gear, a pall of gloom is palpable.

No, it is not the threat of any impending terrorist plot to disrupt the celebration; it's the news that the government has relented to the demand of religious groups to acknowledge the highest academic degree of unregulated Qawmi madrasa as equivalent to a Masters degree offered by universities. People were shocked to learn that removal of a recently unveiled sculpture of a Greek Goddess, a universally accepted symbol of justice, from the Supreme Court premises, was also under active consideration.

For a nation that takes immense pride in its secular identity, this development comes as a rude awakening. People, other than those in the religious right, feel betrayed that the much celebrated 'spirit of war of liberation' has been blatantly compromised. At a time when a single stream in education has been universally acknowledged to be

the pathway to progress, development and modernity, the decision to recognise Dawra as equivalent to the Master's degree is baffling and disturbing.

So far, despite repeated prodding and initiatives of the government, the Qawmi madrasa authorities have steadfastly refused to register those institutions and bring them under any regulatory framework. In October 2013, as the final touches on a draft law for

has retained an ironfisted control over the course curricula of Qawmi madrasa and has resolutely opposed what they view as "interference" in their affairs. It is understood that Qawmi madrasa do not have courses on science, social science, mathematics and literature and only a handful of these institutions have courses in Bangla and English, and that too up to grade eight level. It's worthwhile to mention

Islamic Arabic University to issue the certificates, they also rejected the government move to include one of its (government) representatives in the degree issuing committee. The government appears to have given in to the pressure. The education minister has confirmed that his ministry will soon issue a circular to give effect to the prime ministerial announcement and also "a law would be made, if required".



At a time when a single stream in education has been universally acknowledged to be the pathway to progress, development and modernity, the decision to recognise Dawra as equivalent to Master's degree is baffling and disturbing.

outlining the curriculum, evaluation system, setting up of six tiers and forming of the Bangladesh Qawmi Madrasa Education Authority was underway, the government was threatened with a "civil war" if it tried to "control" Qawmi madrasa. Instead of confronting the challenge of such groups, the government retreated and the ministry refrained from placing the draft before the Cabinet. Later, the government appointed a commission headed by Hefajat-e-Islam chief Shah Ahmed Shafi to come up with ways to recognise the certificates. It is in line with the proposal of the Shafi Commission that the Awami League government has announced to give recognition to the certificates.

While the state's effort to introduce liberal and science courses in other stream of madrasa education (Alia) has made some headway, the vested group

that the Qawmi madrasa leadership has remained steadfast in its position that those institutions are only meant for Islamic education and thus finds incorporation of other subjects as "unnecessary" and "unacceptable".

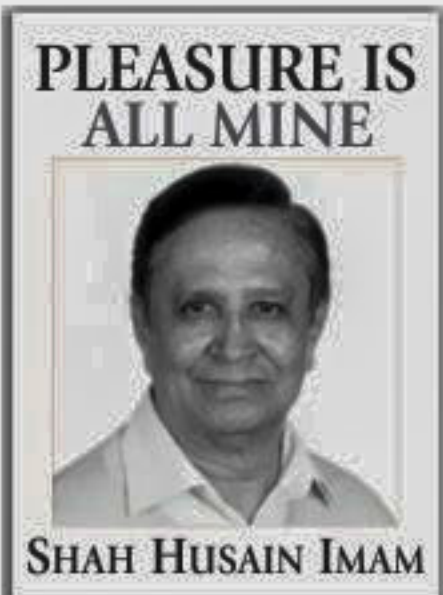
The helplessness of the authorities in reigning in this situation is palpable. News reports inform that at a meeting on March 28, the ministry decided to "gradually start recognising Qawmi madrasa certificates from the elementary level". But it was the pressure exerted by the Chittagong based Hefajat-e-Islam that led the government to recognise Dawra certificate first "to help students get the job". Interestingly, according to the proposal, a committee of representatives of six madrasa boards will issue the certificate. The Qawmi leaders not only turned down the government proposal to authorise the Islamic University or the

It is noteworthy that the Sheikh Hasina government has finally completed the task that was left unfinished by the government of Khaleda Zia. Three months before leaving office on August 21, 2006 Begum Zia announced her government would recognise Dawra certificates. Due to time constraints, the decision could not be implemented during her tenure.

The Qawmi madrasa certificate saga confirms that despite all the hullabaloo of differences, there is a remarkable degree of consistency among Bangladeshi political elite to compromise the spirit of the Liberation War. It's time the true upholders of the spirit of liberation expose this pretense. Nababarsha provides the perfect opportunity for doing so.

The writer teaches at the University of Dhaka.

Beyond the MoUs



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

government cooperation. There is a 'qualification clause' to state level cooperation though in public perception. The outcome is regarded widely as India-driven. It is also viewed

THE large number of MoUs and deals signed between New Delhi and Dhaka during our PM's visit to India is evidently a product of government-to-

Bangladesh has not been denied of its inputs but to underscore the power of the primary agenda setter.

All this, however, goes to prove Indian Congress leader and former diplomat Mani Shankar Aiyar's forthright statement in Dhaka nearly a decade ago that "India needs Bangladesh more than Bangladesh needs India".

But presently, somebody put it like this, "China card is a big boil that needed to be lanced."

If the above narrative of government-to-government cooperation with a scintilla of qualification about the statement is

be a cakewalk. Thus, the people of Bangladesh looked forward to an immediate satisfactory solution on thorny livelihood and survival issues, let alone bridging trade gaps which is well within the Indian grasp to deliver.

On the cultural level the two countries share similarities in heritage and lifestyle. There can be much better communication at the grassroots level leading up to the wider middle class. The academia and cultural icons of the two countries have been exchanging visits on some scale but this must be stepped up with a wider representation from Bangladesh. Our television channel programmes

parts of India. This needs to be checked for the sake of warm relations with the people of Bangladesh. More to the point, that may help neutralise far-right fringes.

Incidentally, veteran Indian leader LK Advani has suggested that Bangladesh Prime Minister could help secure a positive response from Pakistan for resumption of a peace initiative with India. But we have serious issues with Pakistan. Among others, it has tried to incite violence which has had a backlash in Bangladesh. Vested quarters wait in the wings to take advantage of the attempted trouble-mongering.

We must not shove under the carpet what may be bubbling away beneath the surface and try to deal with it energetically and wholeheartedly.

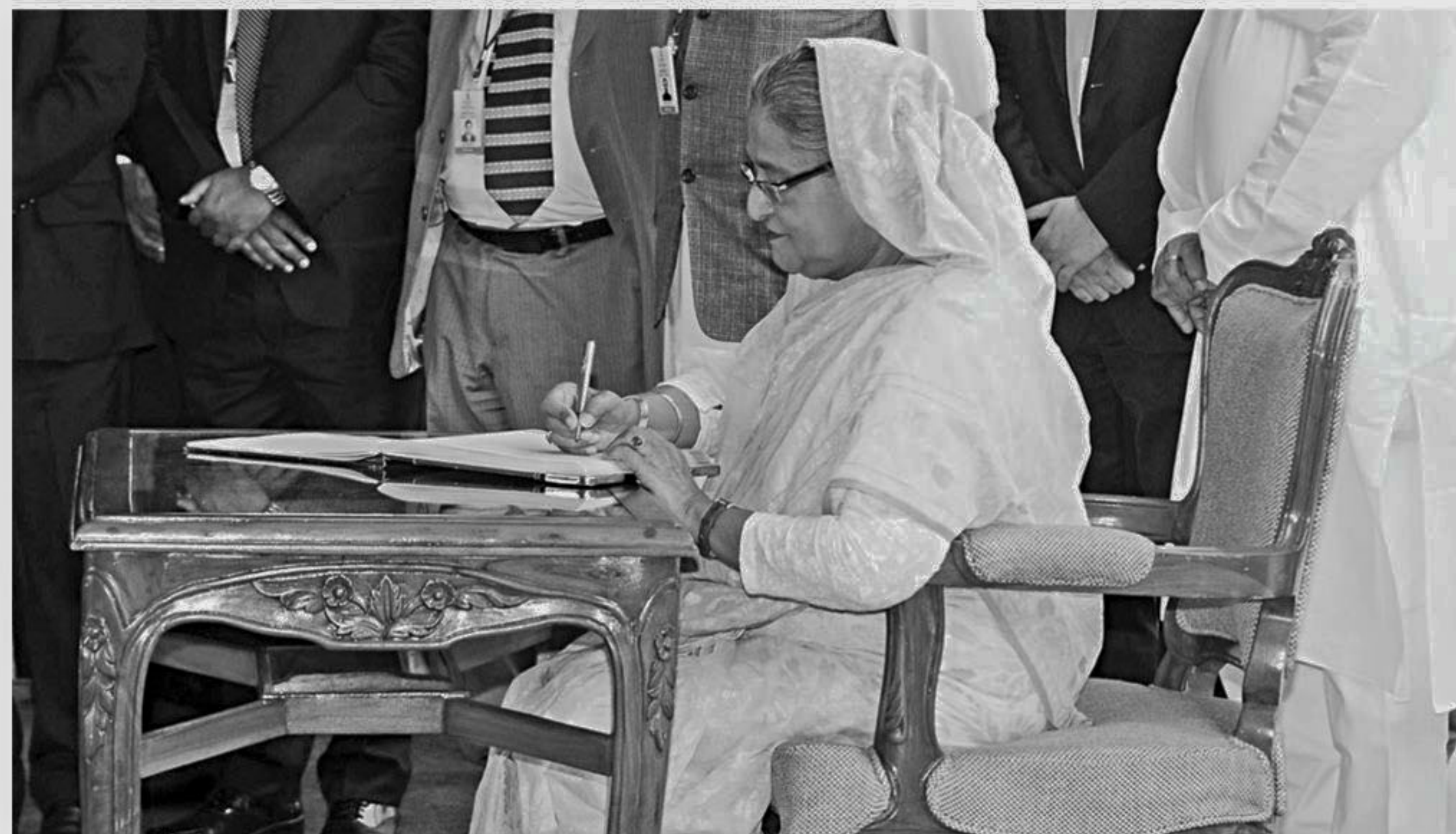
Of the 22 deals signed with India, you have to scratch your head to find those that directly relate to people-to-people relationship. Scrolling down the long list of MoUs you see only a few that may help enhance contact at the people level.

To tick these off: MoU and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on passenger and cruise services on the coastal and protocol route between the two countries; audio-visual co-production agreement; MoU on cooperation in the field of mass media; agreement for the regulation of motor vehicle passenger traffic (Khulna-Kolkata route) and SOP of the agreement; and financing agreement for the construction of 36 community clinics.

Subject to availability of details of the MoUs including the SOPs and their implementation, expert opinions can only be academic at this stage.

At any rate, older generations wax nostalgic about whistles going to be heard on the old rail and river routes that had been closed down since the 1965 India-Pakistan war. Today's youth may be wistfully looking at the benefit of greater sub-regional contacts.

The writer is a commentator on current affairs and former Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*. E-mail: shahhusainimam@gmail.com



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina signs visitors' book during her visit for homage at the Samadhi of Mahatma Gandhi at Rajghat, New Delhi on April 8, 2017.

PHOTO: FLICKR/MEAPHOTOALLERY

as an extension of the grounds we had yielded without securing settlement of some important disputes with the neighbouring country.

There is an unwritten thumb rule on negotiating circuits, especially in the UK - "It is the minute taker who influences a slant in outcome". This is not, however, to suggest that

true then what is equally true is that there's been little value addition to people-to-people relationship between the two neighbours. In fact a blank has been drawn in that area.

The MoUs and deals have a long gestation period apart from the fact that implementing them in a balanced and equitable way will not

need to be shown in India towards a fair dissemination of creative content between the two countries.

For all these to happen, visa restrictions will have to be further relaxed and hospital and hotel services made user-friendly.

On a political level, the Hindutva card is being played out fiercely in