

# Expect everything, appreciate nothing



CHINTITO PAHELA BAISHAKH SINCE 1995

**Y**ET another Pahela Baishakh, the 1424th in fact, with lots of fanfare, merriment and of course hullabaloo came to pass. But one matter was confined in deafening silence for the second year running – the 20 percent bonus (of basic pay) for employees of all government, autonomous and semi-autonomous institutions disbursed as per a gazette. Some private.org, dare I say a few, may also have abided by that particular gazette, although not binding on them, and yet they do afford other festival bonuses in line with the government practice.

The 'thank you' was not implied before or after the annual *panta bhaat* even in the media, which only recently went fanatical with a 'more important' development - that of a celebrity, his wife and their, albeit hidden but cherubic, baby. My fault that I came to know of the lady only after she faced the press, hoping simultaneously that my prior knowledge about the existence of our own SK does not start another domestic fracas.

Well, frankly speaking, we can't really expect the beneficiaries to print *beesh satangsho* on their punjabi, saree or their forehead - some prefer the cheek - to express their gratitude to the government at a Mongol Shobhajatra. Regrettably though, the appreciation (if any at all) did not show on the face of many of the quiet recipients,

presumably being slothful at home all day and wondering what the fuss was all about. How can one be so glum on the first day of the year is not a relevant query for those who remain so for the entire year. Those of us whose files they handle are bitterly aware of their disposition.

Interestingly, the Bengali Nababarsha bonus was not the culmination of any popular demand. Nor was there a massive mass movement on the streets or in the corridors of the Secretariat and state corporations. In fact, the first time I heard about it was when news of it was made public. It came too easily at the behest of the Prime Minister, who perhaps wanted to share the joy of our own New Year with those who help her keep operational the State structure. To find out if recipients were delighted, she will need to employ extra detectives. They should not mind the additional work because they too benefitted from the gratuity.

We are first and foremost a thankless nation. This *prokoti* idiosyncrasy, although universally acknowledged, came to light again in 1948 when we (by the way, I wasn't there) dumped Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy on the pretext that he was born in Midnapore (West Bengal). Although as a Muslim League leader, and later as the Prime Minister of (the whole of) Bengal (1946-1947), he did everything to carve out a province for the Bengali Muslims (albeit as a wing of Pakistan) at the time the British finally granted independence to the divided people of the subcontinent.

Our track record of expressing gratitude to freedom fighters is cursory at best because thousands, especially those in villages, have



TODD DAVIDSON/ILLUSTRATION/WORKS CORBIS

lived in abject poverty since after December 16, 1971; the better among many have toiled 'valiantly' as day labourers and 'courageously' as petty vendors. We have written poems and novels, sung songs and made music, enacted events from the nine-month war in television plays and movies, painted and sculpted our heroes, but have looked the other way when some of them needed succour.

I have not heard this featured in talk shows at all (how do most of these 'talkers' know about everything, starting from apple to zebra?), nor seen it in print or social media, and so on behalf of the freedom fighters and

their families, I will take the liberty and this opportunity to thank the Sheikh Hasina government which, in recognising the poor conditions of many freedom fighters, has raised the FF monthly allowance by 150 percent, effective from January this year.

There is this person ahead of us who holds ajar the door. Do we utter a little thank you? Someone offers a seat on a bus. Do we consider that seat our birth right and ignore the kind person for the rest of the journey, lest he becomes 'too' friendly? A car stops or slows down to let a group of people cross the busy road; I know jaywalking is an offence.

Do any from among the lot wave to the driver and offer a smile? After all, he is a driver. A teacher goes out of the way to help a sick student. Do we remember Sir/Madam in our prayers?

We cannot imagine how much we have to be thankful for. Last week a son's body was being brought back home by his parents after futile medical efforts in India. On the way to the border, the father collapsed and died. Do we thank Allah on a daily basis for being with our parents, and our children? It's not automatic. And one not-so-good day, they are gone, sometimes forever.

Desperation, returning would be as deadly as going over, is compelling thousands to pack like sardines onto rubber boats unfit for Mediterranean crossings to attempt the perilous journey to Europe. The dead are lowered into the sea they have never seen before.

Boko Haram has been commandeering hundreds of girls away from their parents and home, school and friends, and subjecting them to torture and abuse day in and day out for years. They too dream of education, a job, and a better life with their parents.

Syrians find no place to hide, no building to call home. For seven years their houses, schools and hospitals, and children (almost in that order of significance) are being bombed and gassed by militaries which do not speak one word of Arabic.

Are we grateful that we are sipping tea on a rain-soaked veranda?

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## Myanmar's policy shifts towards major powers



KAVI CHONGKITTAVORN

**M**YANMAR has made substantial shifts towards its relations with major powers comprising China, Russia and the United States. They are key regional players in Southeast Asia which will impact directly on peace and stability as well as economic development in Myanmar.

In the first half of this year, China has made impressive diplomatic inroads throughout Southeast Asia, taking advantage of the lack of policy clarity coming from the new US administration of President Donald Trump.

So far, Washington has flexed its muscle over the conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan and displayed a more reconciliatory tone towards Europe. That much was clear. It was only on Thursday that Vice President Mike Pence said that Trump would attend the Asia Pacific Economic Leaders Meeting in Vietnam, the ASEAN-US summit and the East Asia Summit.

Meanwhile, Beijing has been able to sharpen its long-standing policy and make the necessary adjustments to ensure strong friendships and cooperation with countries in the region.

Myanmar President U Htin Kyaw's recent visit to China demonstrated the new dynamics of their bilateral ties, which have encountered different challenges over the years.

Obviously, China has placed the highest value on Htin Kyaw's week-long trip, knowing full well that this would be the most pivotal time to further strengthen their 67-year-old bilateral ties amid growing anxieties over the US policy towards the region.

The joint press communiqué issued after his visit was extensive and forward looking, as China recognised the so-called Myanmar's way of doing things.

"China supported Myanmar in following a development path in line with its own national conditions and steadily promoted democratic transition..." As such, it would commit Beijing to help Nay Pyi Taw in its endeavours to promote both economic and political development at the same time. It must be noted here that for Beijing, such a commitment represents a new model of bilateral relations promoted by the current Chinese leadership.

In addition, China expressed strong support for "Myanmar in realising domestic peace and national reconciliation through political dialogue." In return, Myanmar thanked China for its assistance extending to Nay Pyi Taw's domestic peace and national reconciliation and welcomed its continued constructive role in this process.

Most importantly as far as China-Myanmar

relations are concerned, Myanmar reiterated its firm commitment to the one-China policy and continued support towards "China's position on the questions of Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang." Akin to Cambodia, Myanmar has become another Asean member to concur to such stringent interpretations on the one-China policy.

After the scandal over the seizure of Singapore's armoured vehicles tanks in Hong Kong last November, China has attempted to prevent further erosion of the one-China policy by becoming more forceful in pressing Asean members to adhere to it.

In 2013, Singapore concluded a free trade agreement with Taiwan by using different designations. The Philippines and Indonesia are pursuing a similar arrangement. Beijing is concerned that other Asean members will jump on the bandwagon, further complicating ties with the grouping.

The quick operation of the oil pipeline also indicates that future Myanmar-China relations will be further strengthened. Both countries are confident that any remaining challenges posed by the controversial Myitsone Dam and the Letpadaung mine in Sagaing region will be resolved after final recommendations are made by the relevant assessment commissions.

During Htin Kyaw's visit, he also received an assurance that China would continue to play a "constructive" role in the peace process.

Myanmar's National League of Democracy-led government has been pushing for the much delayed second batch of the 21st Century Panglong Conference, which is now scheduled to be held in May. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi wants to have all armed ethnic groups to sign the nationwide ceasefire agreement. Those armed groups that were left-out included — the United Wa State Army, the Arakan Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Ta'ang National Army and Kachin Independent Army. As the NLD-led government enters its second year, the peace process and border security remain top priorities, but are equally elusive. The link between domestic and external factors were discussed during the summit meeting in Beijing, but whether it would produce positive results on the ground remained to be seen. To ensure that Myanmar and China are on the same page and follow similar strategic plans, Ms Suu Kyi has already confirmed her participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Summit in Beijing from May 14-15.

In comparison to China, Myanmar-Russia ties have been cordial, but they are still very much focused on military-related cooperation. The two countries will celebrate their 70th anniversary of relations next year. In retrospect, Russia has been faithful to Myanmar, treating the strategic Southeast Asian country as a gateway to Asean. Better Myanmar-Asean integration would also be beneficial to Russia.

Due to Myanmar's external factors and unique political system and non-aligned diplomacy, its bilateral ties with Russia have special characteristics, focusing heavily on military and security-related matters. The international boycott imposed by the West since the late 1980's has further warmed their relationship. Russia has been quite sympathetic to Myanmar prior to its dramatic transformation in 2011. During the 1980's-1990's, thousands of Myanmar officials and students were dispatched to Russia for training and study, especially in nuclear-related science and technology.

At this juncture, Russia is diversifying its cooperation with Myanmar to include economic, cultural and scientific fields. Although Russia does not have a big investment in Myanmar, its future interest in oil and gas exploration would increase

its investment portfolio. Last year, Russia provided more than 300 scholarships to Myanmar students.

Finally, after years of optimism over the prospects of US-Myanmar relations, the harsh realities have kicked in and seriously damaged the once unshakable bilateral relationship. Kudos must go to President Barack Obama who invested lots of foreign policy efforts to ensure Myanmar moved towards a new era by working closely with the previous administration under President U Thein Sein. Without him, the current transformation would not have been possible.

Truth be told, the US interest in normalising ties with Myanmar was aimed essentially at distancing the country from North Korea to halt the former's nuclear ambition and desired missile technological development. Washington was extremely concerned that there would be quick knowledge transfer of these know-hows between the two countries. In late May 2011, the US Navy intercepted a North Korean ship carried missile technology in the Andaman Sea destined for Myanmar and managed to force the ship to return home.

Fortunately, the Myanmar-North Korea ties were quickly neutralised and their ongoing nuclear cooperation has subsequently been stopped ahead of US-Myanmar normalisation. Given the current focus on the nuclear threats from North Korea dominating global headlines, Myanmar could have been targeted as well without the earlier policy's u-turn.

So far, the Trump administration has not yet made known its policy toward Myanmar, whether it would continue to pursue the same path or adopt a new one. However, judging from the US position and official comments on the Rakhine situation, Washington is pressuring Nay Pyi Taw to do more over the communal conflicts. Daw Suu Kyi has already asked the international community for time and patience, as she is dealing with the issue through both domestic and international mechanisms.

Early next month, she is scheduled to visit key members of European Union following her participation in the 30th Asean Summit in Manila. She plans to update her colleagues on the latest development in Rakhine and remedial measures that have been instituted there since they last met on December 19, 2016.

It remains to be seen how her reputation and shuttle diplomacy will play out in coming months as Myanmar intensifies broader engagements with concerned major powers, while at the same time mitigating the adverse effects emanating from the Rakhine situation.

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This is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors and columnists from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers and websites across the region.



Obviously, Myanmar agreed to such a comprehensive statement as a goodwill gesture following China's support at the UN Security Council for blocking a proposed statement in March on the situation in Rakhine State. Russia, another member of the UN Security Council, also vetoed the statement. Previously, in January 2007, both countries blocked a UN resolution on the situation in Myanmar.

The cosy up of the Myanmar-China friendship has been clearly manifested by the opening of their long-delayed oil pipeline, which will transport oil from the Bay of Bengal into China's Yunnan provinces, some 800 kilometres inland. With both the oil and gas pipelines now in operation, Myanmar has suddenly become a major connectivity route for China's Belt and Road Initiative — a showcase of Xi's mega-plan in mainland Southeast Asia. China's efforts elsewhere, especially in Laos and Thailand, are still at the early stage.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**

**FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT**  
STATESMAN, POLITICAL LEADER AND THE 32ND PRESIDENT OF THE US

*Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Jelly buys
- 5 Six people in a sedan, e.g.
- 11 Help in crime
- 12 Relaxed
- 13 Inspiration
- 14 Trembling
- 15 Burner spot
- 17 Tell tales
- 18 Start a set
- 22 Court rapper
- 24 Pay for everyone
- 25 -- Baba
- 26 By way of
- 27 Touches down
- 30 Hired thugs
- 32 Broadway backer

**DOWN**

- 1 Copier problem
- 2 Neighbour
- 3 Clearing up
- 4 Wonder of song
- 5 Play group
- 6 With no markup
- 7 Death personified
- 8 Remote
- 9 Try out
- 10 Was a pioneer
- 16 Sushi choice
- 19 Tacking turns
- 20 Conceited
- 21 Greek vowels
- 23 Actor Rickman
- 28 Century division
- 29 Lists of candidates
- 30 Collins ingredient
- 31 "Twelfth Night" countess
- 35 Breather
- 36 Writer Rice
- 37 Smaller amount
- 38 Young fellow
- 39 Afternoon hour
- 40 Army sack

**BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER**

THAT ROBO CLEANER ISN'T WORKING. IT JUST SITS THERE.

YOU HAVE TO PUSH ITS BUTTONS.

GREG? NOT WALKER.

OH, YOU MEAN I HAVE TO DO ALL THE WORK?!

**BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

YOU'RE THE APPLE OF MY EYE, HAMMIE.

WHAT'S THAT MEAN?

IT'S GOOD. IT MEANS YOU'RE MY FAVORITE LITTLE BOY IN THE WORLD.

OH, OKAY.

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

YOU'RE THE BROCCOLI OF MY EYE.