

## Pandemic pushing up poverty rate again

Recovery depends on govt's aid packages and mass vaccination

ACCORDING to a new report released by the World Bank, the ongoing pandemic has reversed Bangladesh's steady trend of poverty reduction, which had continued over the past two decades. Data from the government showed that the poverty rate in the country stood at 21.8 percent in December 2019. Therefore, it can be safely assumed that the rate right now is much higher than that.

Various studies that came out in the recent past had estimated that the pandemic created somewhere between 17.5 and 20 million new poor in the country. And the World Bank also said that 30 percent of the country's population is now living below the poverty line. Despite the government's relatively quick response to the economic shock from the pandemic, its aid packages to the poor were not very effective due to a number of implementation challenges. And small businesses also struggled to access the government's stimulus funds.

Once the first wave of the pandemic started to subside, things did begin to look up, according to the World Bank study. However, as the country is now being severely hit by a new wave of the virus, things could again get much worse.

As we enter a fresh round of "hard lockdown", the economy is expected to get hit hard again. And many more people could lose their jobs as a result, particularly those working in the informal sector—which makes up the majority of our labour force. In order to mitigate these losses and to prevent more people from falling back into poverty, the government needs to immediately come up with new aid packages. However, they must also be designed better and be delivered more efficiently.

At the same time, the government's number one priority has to be to reduce the spread of the virus, so that businesses can go back to functioning as close to normal, as early as possible. In the long run, that is the best way of ensuring that the economic shock of the pandemic is minimised. And for that, mass vaccination is key, as the World Bank pointed out.

## Controlling the pandemic

Community engagement is an essential element of a multipronged strategy

THE best strategy to fight the pandemic is to stifle its spread. This was brought out quite clearly during the last one year of our experience of the virus.

Although the government has decided, belatedly though, to go for a general lockdown to curb the spread of the virus, it doesn't quite solve the ancillary problems thrown up by the pandemic. A general lockdown has far wider and severer implication; the economic impacts leave an equally damaging effect, if not more, on the nation. It throws up the question of lives and livelihood. The efficacy of the combat plan depends on how a balance is made between the two. This dichotomy is not unique to Bangladesh. Even the rich nations have faced the same contrasting compulsions.

Combating the pandemic demands a multipronged effort and this aspect was brought out very well in a virtual discussion organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue on Monday. Thus, a lockdown must also come with adequate support to the marginalised so that health safety measures can be enforced more effectively. And, apart from the government's fiscal policy to deal with the economic impact, particularly on the marginalised segment of society, experts felt that the role of the community in dealing with the pandemic was an indispensable aspect of the mitigation effort. Community based efforts to improve awareness regarding the health safety measures would be more effective than the general efforts that we have experienced so far. And the community can also pool resources, both cash and kind, to help those who would be comparatively at a greater disadvantage than the others more fortunate. The suggestion of building community isolation centres that can be operated with the help of patients' relatives is an idea worth considering.

We hope that the administration will give due consideration to the suggestions made at the conference. We are sure too, that the government will come up with aid programmes like last year. While those previous efforts were partly blunted by some unscrupulous officials and local leaders, we hope that will not be allowed to happen this time.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Joyful childhood education a must

Education is said to be the backbone of the nation, the means of development, and the key to social change. Learning something new has always been exciting to children, but an unfavourable and unfriendly learning atmosphere instills a fear of studying in their minds. In the deep-rooted tradition of rote learning, the tag of "examinee" has been stuck to them, eating away at their curiosity in learning new things. It is important for education to be pleasant and joyful for the children, otherwise it becomes nothing more than a process of simply obtaining a certificate.

Wares Ali Khan, Sadar, Narsingdi

# The secular spirit of Pahela Baishakh

A look into the history of the Bangla New Year can tell us how Pahela Baishakh is rooted in all the different traditions and faiths of this diverse land

MUHAMMAD ENAMUL HAQUE

LET us think about the origin of the Bangla Noboborsho—how it evolved through the years and what the current status of this Noboborsho is. The way we celebrate our new year is quite different from the way other nations of the world celebrate it, which is only natural, given that different nations live in different geographical locations and environments.

The phrase "Bangla Noboborsho" (Bangla New Year) is synonymous with "Pahela Baishakh" (the first day of Baishakh) now. It took thousands

In some places, the new year would be celebrated in winter, while in other places it would be celebrated in spring or autumn, based on the importance of the season to that particular place. Moreover, small seasonal festivals would be held on a regular basis. It is easily understandable that the main seasonal festival of the Bengal region used to be celebrated in summer. And all over the world, the main seasonal festivals of the year have turned into the new year festival. The same may have happened here. What I think is, in Bangladesh the havoc wreaked by the *Kalboishakhi* (nor'wester), followed by the new creation of life in nature, compelled



PHOTO: STAR

of years for these two terms/phrases to become synonymous with each other. Noboborsho used to be celebrated as a seasonal festival in ancient societies, whereas Pahela Baishakh used to be celebrated as an agricultural festival by the non-nomadic people. In ancient times when people followed a nomadic lifestyle, they used to celebrate seasonal festivals according to the change of seasons. When people invented agricultural science, they settled down. They started to live in one place permanently as they had to sow seeds and harvest at the right time of the year. They then learned that 12 moons made one year. Basically, Baishakh, Jaishtha, etc. are lunar months.

What is notable here is that in different parts of the world, the new year used to be celebrated in different seasons.

us to accept the dominance of summer in our life. If not, there would be religious influences on our new year celebrations as our country is inhabited by Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and many Indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, we don't see any such influence on our new year festivals.

Some may say that the occasion of *halkhata* is influenced by religion. It has been observed that a religious *shostibachon* is usually written on top of the *halkhata*. While a Muslim businessman writes "Elahi Bharosha", a Hindu person writes "Nomo Goneshay Nomo". Similarly, a Buddhist writes "Budhdhong Shronong Guochhami....." while a Christian draws a crucifix. But that does not mean this occasion is influenced by any religion. This *shostibachon* is only an expression of one's personal religious belief.

*Bangla Noboborsho is an ancient tradition of this country. Through the festivals of Pahela Baishakh, the people of this country have kept their traditions alive. Singing, dancing, feasting, etc. are the common features of any festival, be it ancient or new. Although in this modern age, some features of this festival have changed, the basics of this festival remained the same.*

Although at present, *halkhata* has become a business-related occasion, it was originally related to agriculture. In ancient times, business was done based on a reciprocal relationship. A household head would keep some of his agricultural produce for his family's consumption and trade the rest with others. He would keep count by tying a knot in the rope, or by accumulating rocks. *Halkhata* is a derivative of this.

There was also an occasion called *Punnah*, which is not in practice nowadays. It was a lively event in which taxes would be collected and the *Zamindar* and his subjects would meet and exchange pleasantries. This occasion was entirely based on agriculture as there was no other way for the farmers to pay tax if the harvest was not good. Needless to say, at the beginning the farmers would pay taxes with their produce, and later it was done through the use of coins. No religious rituals were related to this occasion. Here, I want to mention the Sanskrit word *bohureehi* [the person who harvested *bohu* (much) *breehi* (paddy)]. The phrase *dhaner jamidar* can be mentioned here as well.

Another agriculture-based occasion was *gorur dour* (cow race), which is now extinct. On Pahela Baishakh or Bangla Noboborsho, this race would be arranged in Munshiganj of Dhaka. There was no religious element in this event either. In southern India, such an event still takes place.

The seasonal and agricultural festivals of the country have evolved into fairs of the new year. Agricultural products and handicrafts are sold in these fairs. It should be noted here that although most of the fairs of the world are influenced by religions, religions have not yet had any influence on our fairs.

The Gomveera, held both in India's Maladaha and Pakistan's Rajshahi, is an exclusive occasion of the new year. Speaking about the origin and evolution of Gomveera, Pundit Haridash Palit said that it is an evolved form of Gajon of Shiva. Because in these songs by addressing *bhola* (Bholanath is equal to Shiva), the singer depicts the stories of happiness and woes of the people. But one thing Haridash Palit didn't notice is that *Shiber Gajon* is held on the day of *Chaitra Shangkranti*, the last day of the Bangla month Chaitra, not in Baishakh. Neither did he say anything about why the occasion of Gomveera takes place throughout the month of Baishakh.

The Muslims believe that *bhola* is not Shiva or Bholanath. According to them, *bhola* is the person who has forgotten and ignored all his responsibilities and thus brought misfortune to people. The Muslims say that Gomveera is *Saltamamir Gan*, which depicts the distresses of the bygone year and wishes of preventing such sad events in the future.

Bangla Noboborsho is an ancient tradition of this country. Through the festivals of Pahela Baishakh, the people of this country have kept their traditions alive. Singing, dancing, feasting, etc. are the common features of any festival, be it ancient or new. Although in this modern age, some features of this festival have changed, the basics of this festival remained the same. So the Bangla Noboborsho is a seasonal as well as an agricultural festival. But this festival is, in no way, related to any religion.

This is an excerpt of Dr Muhammad Enamul Haque's article titled "Bangla Noboborsho ba Pahela Baishakh", translated by Naznin Titli (Source: *Bangladesher Utsab: Nababarsha*, edited by Mobarak Hossain and Kutub Azad, published by Bangla Academy). This article was originally published on April 13, 2015 in *The Daily Star's* Noboborsho Special Supplement.

# On President Biden's Climate Summit and John Kerry's visit to Dhaka

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

he was withdrawing former President Trump's withdrawal letter from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and that the United States was rejoining the Paris Agreement.

He has since followed this up by appointing John Kerry, who was President Obama's Secretary of State and had been key in achieving the Paris Agreement in 2015, as Biden's Climate Envoy. He has also declared that he wants the US to not only rejoin the Paris Agreement, but to become a leader in tackling climate change with the degree of seriousness that the issue deserved.

In that vein, he also plans to hold a leaders' climate summit on April 22, where he will be inviting 40 of the world's leaders to join virtually and support the US in taking stronger actions regarding the climate crisis, and prepare to make really meaningful progress at COP26 (to be held in November 2021 in Glasgow, Scotland, hosted by the United Kingdom).

President Biden has sent his Climate Envoy, John Kerry, around the world to hand-deliver his invitation to the leaders' climate summit. Kerry just visited India and Bangladesh, where he delivered the invitation to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has formally accepted the invitation. During his stay in Dhaka, he was hosted for lunch by the Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, where I had the privilege of being invited to join.

So, what can our expectations be from President Biden's Climate Summit?

The first point to reiterate is that, while the world has indeed welcomed President Biden rejoining the Paris Agreement and also his declaration that he wanted the US to become a world leader in tackling the climate crisis, he will need to earn that position of leadership. This means that his actions will speak louder than his words.

Therefore, the biggest challenge that every country has to deliver on is to make meaningful plans for getting to

net zero emissions and not just pledges to reach that goal by 2050, although the pledges are indeed important as well. The US has yet to share its pledge and plans, and we look forward to some really ambitious plans which will enable the global temperature to be kept below a 1.5 degrees Centigrade warming, which is what all countries agreed to in the Paris Agreement in 2015.

Delivering these emissions reductions at the national level is by far the most

credibility of the developed countries.

To Biden's credit, he has promised to pay the USD two billion that was due from the US in the year 2020 and has said that he will also raise more during 2021.

The challenge for the US will be to get all the other countries to deliver their promised amounts for both 2020 as well as 2021. An associated issue with the amounts made available is with the distribution for developing countries to either tackle mitigation or adaptation



US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry with Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen at State Guest House Padma on Friday, 9 April, 2021. PHOTO: COURTESY

important action that Biden and his government have to deliver, and will be judged by. To his credit, President Biden has indeed appointed some very climate change-savvy cabinet members and is taking an all-of-government approach to tackling climate change in the US. His recent USD two trillion infrastructure bill has detailed a lot of actions to tackle climate change. These are indeed welcome developments.

The second pledge that Biden will have to deliver on is one made by the developed countries in Paris in 2015 to collectively provide USD 100 billion a year to the developing countries so they may tackle climate change, starting from 2020. The share of the US to this pledge was USD three billion, and President Obama provided USD one billion of that just before he handed power over to Trump, who then stopped payments of the remaining amount.

Partly for this reason, the year 2020 has come and gone without the USD 100 billion having been provided to developing countries, as promised in Paris in 2015. This has left a major dent in the

to the climate crisis. The demand from the vulnerable developing countries has always been for the ratio of support to be 50/50 for mitigation and adaptation, with the adaptation funds being targeted at the most vulnerable of the developing countries. However, from the data available so far, the ratio for 2020 was 80 percent for mitigation going to a handful of bigger developing countries and only 20 percent for adaptation in the majority of vulnerable developing countries. This imbalance must be rectified going forward.

The third and final major issue to be addressed is the fact that loss and damage due to a rise in the global temperature over one degree Centigrade due to human-induced climate change has become a reality in 2020, and people have lost lives, property and ecosystems due to super wildfires, cyclones, typhoons, hurricanes, and even droughts and heatwaves—all of which are now scientifically linked to human-induced climate change. While this does not mean that these climatic events occurred because of climate change, it is true that

they have become more severe because of the higher global temperature due to the emissions of greenhouse gases over the last decades.

This topic remains a politically sensitive one, as the major-emitting countries do not wish to discuss funding for the victims of loss and damage for fear of being opened up to claims of liability and compensation. Indeed, John Kerry himself inserted a clause in the COP21 decision associated with the Paris Agreement in 2015, in which he insisted that acceptance of Article 8 on Loss and Damage in the Paris Agreement could not be used for liability and compensation.

I had the opportunity during the lunch in Dhaka to ask Kerry about his views on funding the victims of human-induced climate change for the loss and damage that they have suffered. His response was to acknowledge that this was now a reality but that we should focus on raising funds for adaptation and resilience rather than for loss and damage, which he felt would be too politically difficult in terms of convincing the US Congress, who are in charge of fund allocation.

I must say that this response disappointed me and I felt that he was repeating exactly what he had said in Paris back in 2015. The challenge for the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) countries, and for Bangladesh as their leader, is to explain and convince the Biden administration that one of the most consequential outcomes of the US government refusing to fulfil its obligations under the Paris Agreement for the last four years, has been to make the visible and scientifically attributable loss and damage from human-induced climate a reality. Even if the US does not want to make payments as forms of liability and compensation, they can still make funds available under a sense of solidarity with the victims of climate change.

President Biden finding it difficult to convince his Republican Senators to fund victims of the climate crisis is not an acceptable reason for the rest of the world to give the US a pass on this issue.

We must challenge the US to demonstrate that it recognises that loss and damage is truly attributable to human-induced climate change and that it believes the victims deserve funds, which are well beyond adaptation and resilience only.

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