

coffee break



Kanchan Gupta

Lost evenings of Kaal Boishakhi

There was no intimation of a storm when I left home for work last Thursday. It was only after I hit National Highway 24, which is an apology for an inter-State highway that mocks at our tall claims of 'progress' and 'development', that I spotted the dark, menacing storm, roaring across the highrise-dotted dust plains that separate Delhi from Uttar Pradesh. Within seconds an all-engulfing darkness descended at high noon and gale force winds swept down, whooshing their way through malnourished trees and scrub, scooping up dirt and millions of discarded plastic bags, and sending them swirling in the gathering gloom. It was not a pretty sight to see garbage and filth of various descriptions, dumped every day along the highway as part of an officially endorsed waste disposal 'system', being tossed around.

Mercifully, the rain came soon after. First there were fat drops that plonked dully on the windscreen and turned into streaks of black-brown grime. There was a distant roll of thunder, and then the skies opened up, sending a downpour that came crashing like a sheet of water. Within seconds, the stench of festering garbage had been washed away and the plastic bags had disappeared, weighed down by the rain. By the time I crossed Nizamuddin Bridge into Delhi, the roads were flooded and traffic was crawling at a speed lower than usual. Everybody was cranky, which was not unusual. It rained for the next couple of hours, and then drizzled for a long while.

Later that night, the roads looked fresh and clean, with puddles glistening under streetlights and the damp air redolent with the smell of rain. I rolled down the car windows and breathed deeply. You can't do that very often in this part of the country. For all its pretensions of being 'world class', the National Capital Region, barring Lutyens' Delhi, is really a sprawling, polluted concrete slum, pock-marked by ghastly glass-and-chrome malls. Next day's newspapers described the thunder squall as "unseasonal rain" and carried photographs of stalled autorickshaws, cars, buses and trucks with motorcyclists trying to clamber over and across them.

Similar storms at this time of the year are joyously greeted in the eastern hinterland, especially in rural Bengal where they herald the advent of summer. As Chaitro gives way to Boishakh, marking the end of spring, *Kaal Boishakhis*, or nor'westers, make their annual, almost ritual, appearance. The skies turn dark, egrets take flight, their sparkling white plume standing out in sharp contrast to the ink black clouds, and the wind comes roaring, whistling through coconut and palm trees, in a



strong blast that lasts for about five to ten minutes. This is followed by a sharp drizzle that drenches the soil, dampens the air and cools the evening breeze which makes east India so very different from the rest of the country, more so Delhi, India's dust bowl.

Decades ago, while growing up in Jamshedpur, my friends and I would wait for *Kaal Boishakhis* with bated anticipation. The immediate hour after a *Kaal Boishakhi* would be spent collecting green mangoes, raw and sour, which were otherwise forbidden, torn off their tender stalks by the raging wind. There was something Darwinian about the mango trees in our colony: The fittest fruit survived the frenzied storms of Boishakh to mature into delightfully sweet mangoes in the scorching heat of Joishtho. But they never tasted as good as the forbidden fruit.

It was during those years of growing up in a small Singbhum town that we learned the art of grating a seashell on a rock with a rough surface to fashion a peeler for the green mangoes we would surreptitiously collect from Mrs Chowdhury's garden. She had a dog whom she fed Ovaltine and milk for breakfast; Badshah slept all the time and wagged his tail furiously while we stole Mrs Chowdhury's mangoes. She would be busy dusting her house — which she kept spotlessly clean — after the storm. Even if Badshah barked, which was a rarity and I can't recall having heard him bark even once, she wouldn't have heard him. As soon as a *Kaal Boishakhi* would pass, Mrs Chowdhury would switch on her gramophone at full volume and listen to Rabindrasangeet on 78 rpm records. Her favourite was 'Esho hey Boishakh, esho esho...'

On *Kaal Boishakhi* evenings, dinner would be predictable — and, I guess, they still are predictable in Bengali homes that have not traded their Bangalians for tandoori chicken and daal makhni. It would invariably arrive on the table in the form of steaming *khichuri*, *begun bhaja* and *papor bhaja*. The highlight of the meal would be an omelette. On some nights, the omelette would be replaced by fried hilsa from Kolaghat. Many years later, I was invited to a dinner hosted by a professor at University of California, Berkeley. He and his wife had sought to recreate the ambience of a post-*Kaal Boishakhi* dinner. There was 'Esho hey Boishakh, esho esho...' playing on his hi-fi system, curtains had been drawn to shut out the bright evening light, and there was much rustling of brocade and Banarasi silk. Instead of hilsa, they served crisply fried American shad with *khichuri* made with aromatic Basmati rice. The professor recalled his childhood in Birbhum, of how he would run wild in paddy fields with his friends as a *Kaal Boishakhi* raged. Later, he wept copiously into his tumbler of bourbon. The charms of America had obviously proved more seductive for him than the harsh climes of Birbhum.

Just as the ersatz benefits of living in Delhi stops me from going back to the land of *Kaal Boishakhis* where I could teach my daughters how to make peelers from seashells and they could smell the fragrance of rain-soaked earth while collecting green mangoes and chasing dragonflies in the purple light of east India's dusk before settling down for a steaming meal of *khichuri*, *begun bhaja* and omelette, listening to the strains of 'Esho hey Boishakh, esho esho...' playing on a neighbour's gramophone.

open forum

Moral duty to back Tibet

Claude Arpi | Tibetologist and author of several books on Tibet, China and Sino-Indian relations

The recent riots on the 'Roof of the World' have triggered a flurry of reactions. While Indians in general defend the plight of the Tibetan people, some (read Beijing's comrades) believe that it is "an internal affair of China" and that Delhi should scrupulously follow the principle of non-interference in its neighbour's affairs. Still others strongly feel that it is a ploy of the CIA to weaken the Chinese Government and ultimately control the rich mineral resources of the Tibetan plateau.

The latter cite as examples the numerous occasions when the Dalai Lama has been received by the White House or other Western heads of state; the Congressional Gold Medal having been presented to him by the Speaker of the US House of Representatives; or even the support the Tibetan guerrillas got from the CIA in the 1960s (it ended before President Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972).

Personally, I am not a fan of the US, more so since President George W Bush made a fool of himself and his country by rushing to Iraq for a few more drops of oil. But why equate the policies of the present US Administration with the Tibetan issue?

The political choices made by the Dalai Lama are altogether a different matter. To criticise him because he has roamed the world for the past 35 years (his first trip to the West dates back to 1973) as a mendicant seeking support and help for the survival of his people, is not fair. Can someone in life-danger fuss about the emergency team trying to provide first aid? Whenever Western Governments or institutions or individuals have shown consideration and understanding, was it not normal for him to gratefully accept it? Some blame him for receiving the support of Hollywood stars, but is it because one acts in movies that one is a bad guy?

At the end of the day, what is the Tibet issue about? No doubt, for the Tibetans, it is the fate of their country which is at stake, but for Western (and Indian) people, the question of human justice is involved.

Two years ago, in an interview, the Dalai Lama had told me (he used a similar argument in his recent NDTV interview): "I have three commitments: First, as a fellow human being, promotion of human values is my first priority, this covers six billion human beings. Second, I am a Buddhist, and as a Buddhist I want to promote religious harmony; the third is about Tibet. It concerns six million Tibetans."

For the millions who have signed petitions in favour of the Tibetan leader, for the Nobel Committee which awarded him the Peace Prize in 1989, for the Western Governments which officially receive him, for all those who demonstrate against the Olympic

Games being held in totalitarian China, the promotion of universal responsibility, justice for all, respect of fundamental rights and democratic principles have been the main motivations. In fact, these values have no boundary. It is a positive sign for the future if humanity cares more and more for the principles which, let us not forget, represent the highest aspirations of eternal India.

If our 'global village' is to survive the next decades, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the first step to be implemented by all. The next step would be a Declaration of Human Duties which will hopefully soon be drafted.

We also tend to forget that an Olympic year is always a special year for humanity. In reviving the ancient tradition of the Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin's first and foremost objective was to 'build men' and not merely exhibit sporting prowess. The argument that the Olympics is purely a sporting event is historically and ethically wrong.

For Coubertin, Olympism was a religion which would "adhere to an ideal of superior life and aspire for perfection". He spoke of a quadrennial 'Human Spring'. What else than a 'human spring' are we witnessing today across the world? The saddest aspect of the current situation is that the people of China are not allowed to participate in the 'spring' of human spirit.

We could go into the legalities of the Chinese occupation of Tibet or the strategic implications of the recent riots in Lhasa and elsewhere for China's neighbours, but the main issue seems to be that the spirit of Olympism, represented by the Olympic Flame, should remain alive. The monks in the streets of Tibet have set an example for all of us.



Putting undue pressure on kids

This refers to the Sunday debate, "Driving kids to suicide" (*Open Forum*, March 30). It is unfortunate that in today's era, kids are under tremendous pressure to perform well in studies, thanks to ever-increasing peer pressure. I do agree with Mr Debraj Mookerjee's view that parents have unjustified expectations from their children. Guiding them about right and wrong is alright, but parents seem to be taking it too far. If Mr Mookerjee's "friend" can do well as a principal and in ITC despite flunking in 10th standard then I am sure our 'system' is very faulty. Parents must be more realistic and should not forget that every

student cannot become a doctor or an engineer.

Bal Govind Bareilly

Back to square one

The Pakistan People's Party is coming out in its true colours. Mr Asif Ali Zardari's assurances on mending India-Pakistan relations irrespective of the Kashmir issue have proved illusory. The only point on which Pakistan's politicians and its Army agree with each other is the Kashmir issue. It also proves that the 'democrats' of Pakistan are no better than the much-reviled Army rulers.

RJ Khurana Bhopal

looking glass



M Ratan New Delhi

The monks and the dragon

Riots in Tibet have raised both moral and strategic questions for India and the world

Free Tibet in India's interest

NS Rajaram | Scientist and historian

Tibet and Jammu & Kashmir offer striking examples of a self-absorbed leadership placing personal glory ahead of national interest. India is still paying the price for these blunders by being the only country of its size without a recognised border with its giant neighbour. The failure is not just geopolitical, but also one of morality and even identity of India as a nation. It is an unhappy fact that Indian leaders gave no clear vision of national identity: instead, what they gave and followed were personal fetishes like *ahimsa* and Panchasheel that have cost the country dear.

Indian leaders have avoided taking morally forthright stands over international issues like Tibet and Hungary as well as over domestic issues like the Shah Bano affair and *jihadi* terrorism. For this India has earned the label of being a 'soft' state. By supporting the Tibetan people, India could send a clear message to the world and to its own people that it stands for some values that it holds sacred. But this calls for political courage that has been missing so far.

The Tibetan uprising has brought to light some uncomfortable facts which Nehruvians would like to see removed from history books. There is an attempt to whitewash the Chinese occupation of Tibet as a reaction to a CIA conspiracy to turn Tibet into a Western colony with the Dalai Lama as a puppet; one 'secular' writer has even compared him to Osama bin Laden!

This creative rewriting cannot obscure the fact that it was Jawaharlal Nehru's pursuit of international glory in Korea that led to his giving up India's rights in Tibet. As China appeared on India's doorstep by occupying Tibet, the Jawaharlal Nehru Government made a strenuous effort to gain international recognition for Mao's China at India's cost. It is not widely known that India was offered a UN seat as a permanent

member of the Security Council, which Nehru rejected insisting that China be admitted first.

In 1950, as Chinese troops were invading Tibet, India's Ambassador in Beijing KM Panikkar went so far as to claim that protesting the Chinese occupation would be an "interference to India's efforts on behalf of China in the UN". Nehru concurred: "Our primary consideration is maintenance of world peace... Recent developments in Korea have not strengthened China's position, which will be further weakened by any aggressive action (by India) in Tibet."

Deeply disturbed by these developments, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel complained to Nehru that Panikkar "has been at great pains to find an explanation or justification for Chinese policy and actions". India got nothing in return from China. At the very least India could have demanded settling its border with India for its support. But Nehru gave up India's diplomatic rights in Tibet by closing down missions in Lhasa and Gyantse.

An argument is now being made that Nehru had no choice because India was not strong enough to challenge China in Tibet. Nehru himself never made this dubious claim, then or later. China, just coming out of the civil war was overcommitted in Korea and was vulnerable in Tibet. Tibet also had international support.

The highly influential English publication *The Economist* echoed the Western viewpoint when it wrote: "Having maintained complete independence of China since 1912, Tibet has a strong claim to be regarded as an independent state. But it is for India to take a lead in this matter. If India decides to support independence of Tibet as a buffer state between itself and China, Britain and the US will do well to extend formal diplomatic recognition to it."

India would have lost nothing by protesting and gained much in goodwill, but Nehru's infatuation with Communism made him blind to the gross immorality of allowing a peaceful neighbouring people being enslaved. Nehru covered this moral obtuseness with self-righteous arrogance. He saw the spiritual civilisation of Tibet as primitive that could benefit from a dose of socialism administered by the Chinese occupiers. ("A very large dose," said the Dalai Lama.)

Sixty years after independence, it is time for Indians to re-examine their recent history and see how they have been misled by self-righteous rhetoric and posturing leaders pursuing personal glory at the cost of national interest. This has also weakened the country's moral fibre, leaving it without a national vision. It is time India came out of this moral stupor by taking a forthright stand on the side of the oppressed people of Tibet. At the very least there should be no second betrayal.

Deoband means well for all

This has reference to the article, "Let's worry about Islamofascism" (*Coffee Break*, March 30) by Mr Kanchan Gupta. The article has discussed the 'Darul Uloom Declaration' in letter and spirit.

Darul Uloom, Deoband, is concerned that justice is not being done to Muslims in the country. Three main points of the said 'declaration' should be considered seriously. First, it calls upon to condemn "the Western powers which are indulging in aggression and barbarism in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Bosnia". Second, it expresses concern over the fact that "the internal and external policies of our country (India) are getting heavily influenced by these forces". Third, it appeals to "all intellectuals, writers and mediapersons to independently and honestly analyse the national and international affairs and avoid biased and partial attitude". These three points deserve to be appreciated.

The 'declaration' has raised a burning point as well. It says, "Today countless numbers of innocent Muslims are languishing behind bars. And those spreading terror, attacking police stations, killing the police in broad daylight and brandishing illegal arms are roaming free." The reference is obvious: Maoists and Hindutva forces. Isn't it a fact?

Justice is the key word. If justice is denied, nothing can be achieved. What is required is a clear perception of what justice means and how it can be achieved, so that various communities are able to live and work together.

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