

Festival  
News  
2.2.03

# When *basant* comes ...

## Ghazi Salahuddin

With flames rising on every front, in a figurative sense, it is natural for people to feel vulnerable and insecure. The fusion of international and national crises leaves one with paradoxical and inexplicably gloomy thoughts. From the momentous issue of the possible war against Iraq to the seemingly trivial pursuits of our accredited politicians, the entire scene is dark and daunting. So what should people who feel concerned about all this do to, at least, protect themselves from deep and pathological depression?

Well, there is *basant*. With its epicentre in Lahore, the tremors of this festival of spring will be felt in many other cities. Some festivities were launched yesterday but the climax will come next weekend. This, to be sure, is a temporary distraction and may not, if recreational spurts of activity during the current season of marriages are any evidence, provide much solace because people tend to talk about politics and current affairs whenever they get together. Somehow, the contradiction of lamenting the poor state of our collective state of affairs in a situation of wasteful affluence enhances the participants' sense of guilt and impotence.

Still, there is a great need at this time to allow ordinary citizens a sense of participation and purpose in socio-political activities. In the first place, the educated elite and the intelligentsia have to define their role in creating defences against the forces of extremism and fanaticism. But, again, they have to contend with

some very formidable perplexities. In Pakistan, a surge in feelings against the United States is identified with the rise in the strength of the religious alliance that has sympathy with Islamic militants. Globally, however, President Bush has become the target of an anti-war movement and that has a very different spiritual and intellectual foundation.

Ideally, national elections should have provided an opportunity to people to come together and express their views in an organised way. There was a semblance of this in the late sixties. However, Zia-ul-Haq made a concerted effort to de-politicise the people and his ban on union elections in colleges and universities led the way for chaotic and violent manifestation of youth's unrequited passions. Eventually, a de-politicised society was effectively de-intellectualised. Now, it is very hard to enlist the educated middle-class into any social campaigns. That the middle-class itself, largely for economic reasons, is not very relevant in any decision-making process is an additional problem.

Against this backdrop, the great agitation that the existing political scenario has prompted in the minds of concerned individuals is unable to be used as raw material for organised social commitment. One reason, obviously, is that the political scenario is not being adequately investigated and explored by our own institutions and intellectuals. Whatever debate there is can be very superficial and there is hardly any popular dissemination of serious discourse on important international and national issues.

We need to have more of the kind of debate that was held in Lahore on Tues-

day under the aegis of an NGO on implications for our region in the event of an American attack on Iraq. Some of our most respected intellectuals and political analysts were there to express their views. There was an appropriate focus, in this debate, on relations between the US and Pakistan and between India and Pakistan. As was stated by one speaker at this debate, we should look at this situation with reason rather than emotions. Would it be our turn after Iraq is a question that has been posed and this in itself justifies a serious, sober reflection on the evolution of our national security policies and how these policies should be modified.

Coming back to *basant*, the thought that this popular and secular festival, unique in many ways, can have any reference to people's awakening of any kind would appear to have no validity. But there is bound to be some message in its massive appeal and the manner in which it has almost been ritualised, no doubt with extensive commercial underpinnings. There is nothing of this nature in our public life. Citizens of Lahore invest more passion and money in its celebration than they do on any other occasion, including *Eids*. And what is remarkable is that it is laced with colourful cultural activities. It is meant to be a rite of passage, celebrating the advent of spring. Flying kites is only one dimension of the sense of freedom that it inspires.

For once, we find entire communities dancing, so to say, to a different beat. There is a sense of liberation in how they enjoy themselves and let themselves go. Now, the killjoys, who

sometimes appear to be invincible, would surely not approve of people uninhibitedly kicking up their heels and letting down their hair. In previous years, there were some efforts to curtail the rhythm of what the orthodox see as irreligious frivolity. However, the festival has gained in frenzy and attraction. Yes, official sanction, even patronage during the past few years has also contributed to an enlargement of *basant* activities.

For a country that also attracts the odium of being "a platform for terrorism", *basant* would provide an entirely different image. It projects a certain potential and the capacity of the people to enjoy themselves in a spirit of cultural emancipation. Our corporate sector has found some uses of *basant* and a number of functions are held for important clients or to promote business. Perhaps the NGOs operating in the social sector could also find ways of interacting with the *basant* crowds at the periphery of the routine celebrations. The corporate sector, too, has a vested interest in promoting popular participation in cultural activities. In fact, the so-called free market economy has a direct kinship with the free market of ideas.

As for ideas, the anti-war movement that President Bush's war rhetoric has triggered off is becoming global and liberal elements in Pakistan should sincerely endeavour to take advantage of the trend. There are indications that the peace movement is growing in all parts of the world — except the United States. And a few other countries like Pakistan. We do seem to be isolated from the rising wave of international opinion. To a large extent, the peace

movement is a part of the campaign for social justice and human rights. Some observers believe that this movement can become a great force in global affairs.

We, in Pakistan, have more compelling reasons to 'sell' the ideas of peace and social justice to the kind of people who are willing to imbibe the spirit of *basant*. At stake is the freedom they have to celebrate this or any other festival in a manner that is culturally creative. The simple matter of having fun will be in serious jeopardy if the extremists prevail. But the real issues are of greater significance. We may find some amusement in how the religious alliance is conducting itself in the Frontier, where it has a dominating majority. The appointment of a minister who is clean-shaven has caused a controversy and the chief minister had to grow a beard before taking charge. However, their zeal in enforcing what they present as religion is strongly reminiscent of the Taliban. Unfortunately, some American policies have awarded them a bonus in popular backing.

Those of us who are conscious of the assault that the religious militant are bound to mount on democratic and liberal values have no reason to be pleased with the freedom that is being allowed to celebrate *basant* with song and dance. It can only be a façade and the impending struggle will have wider dimensions. What *basant*, however, certifies is the yearning of the ordinary people for freedom and for "pursuit of happiness".

The writer is a staff member  
ghazi\_salahuddin@hotmail.com