

Festival of the Prophet's Birth

Today the 12th of Rabul Awal is a very special day for close on to a quarter of humanity. In fact, this is a specially significant day for all mankind over the last fourteen centuries. For the birth and the works of Muhammad (S.M.), the Messenger of Allah, forms an unmistakable watershed in world history. But for the rise of the Islamic civilisation, pivoted by Prophet Muhammad's (S.M.) social and ideological revolution during the opening years of the seventh century, there wouldn't have been any European Renaissance and no advent of the modern times.

What would be our best thoughts on the occasion of the birth festival of the Prophet of Islam? He represented the resurgence of a people into a most dynamic nation to begin with and then a congress of nations lighting up the dark medieval times in Europe and in India. And what we represent in present-day Bangladesh although most of us pride ourselves as being his followers? Although Tauheed — the unity of the godhead — was an ideological breakthrough for the polytheistic and idolatrous tribes loosely called Arabs more because of their linguistic affinity, the Prophet shaped his cultural and material revolution *par excellence* with the very best in the native Arab traditions — cementing so wonderfully the sundering gaps between tribes of conflicting men.

Pursuit of peace and fairness and of knowledge and tolerance — the hallmark of the Prophet's life — is not something that distinguishes either our society or the various kinds of its leaderships. Prophet Muhammad (S.M.) will be truly remembered and honoured if we repair back to these universal verities so dearly championed by him and the religion he preached to us.

Although religious fundamentalism is popping its head in many a spot of the world, Islam and the Muslims have only to be harmed by this. The genocide of the Bosnian Muslims already has taken a toll of close to 200 thousand lives — going on perhaps without even disturbing a single night's sleep of the bigots. The Bosnian inferno has left a deep dent in the concept of the Islamic Ummah, that will take decades to heal. True regeneration of the nations belonging to the Ummah in their own national terms would hasten the process.

The life and work and the teachings of God's Messenger is all before us all — not only Muslims as such but of all other denominations too — to know and marvel at and to follow and sing in praise.

Balagal ula be-kamalehi
Kashafadduja be-jamalehi
Hasanat jamtye khesalehi
Sallealaih walehi.

Challenges for a New Party

Judging by the broad outline of the Gano Forum (GF), announced by its founder-president, Dr Kamal Hossain on Sunday and an impressive broad-based attendance at the three-day National Grand Convention (NGC) which gave birth to GF, the new political organisation, the branch of a former Awami League (AL) leader, is assured of a cautious welcome throughout the country. It will be cautious, perhaps even reserved, for a long time to come, until GF demonstrates its credibility, its effectiveness as an organisation, especially in reaching the grassroots level and shows some success in carrying out the programme offered to the country during the convention.

In this respect, much is going in favour of the new party. It has focused on the widely-held belief in the country that the system—political, economic and social—is far from working well more than two years after the restoration of parliamentary democracy in the country, a failure for which one would blame, as the GF President has done, the two major political parties, the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the opposition AL. By indulging in mutual recriminations, personal attacks and creating new divisive issues, the two parties have moved further and further away from even from the possibility of creating some kind of a national consensus on problems facing the country. It is this need for a national consensus on whole set of issues ranging from ending the campus violence to creating a corruption free society, that had been pleaded for by this paper again and again, right from its inception, and which has now emerged as a plank in the programme of the new party.

Whether leaders of GF, especially Hossain, had of her ways of promoting the national consensus without running the risk of dividing the secularist, pro-liberation and democratic forces, the risk that has not disappeared, remains a matter of speculation and analysis by political observers. What is more important, the GF has chalked out a course of action. Let it get on with it.

In this course of action, it is much less important for GF to prepare for the next parliamentary election or even to contest any by-election than to create an awareness of development issues at the grassroots level, as Prof Mohammad Yunus of the Grameen Bank did so well on the opening day of the NGC. This cannot be done through rhetoric and endless criticisms of the government and the opposition but by formulating and publishing comprehensive position papers on such issues as family planning, rural poverty, urban employment and well-defined incentives to the private sector. In the end, the new organisation should not only go for its own socio-economic agenda but also win over a constituency of its own rather than through defections from other parties out of the impoverished rural population and the marginalised professional classes at the urban centres. In the end, this should be an important part of the contribution of the GF to creating a new political culture in Bangladesh.

How the major parties, especially BNP and AL, view the emergence of the Forum remain to be seen. It will be a mistake for the ruling party to see it as something of a political bonus, produced by what it might regard as a disarray in AL, while the opposition could make a serious mistake by dismissing it as a betrayal by some dissidents of the party. Whatever may happen later—here, we take a cautious view of the prospects of GF—our major parties should see the development in a positive light. They should also accept the new party as a new player on the political scene, rather than as a third force, and take steps to set their own houses in order, a task they must undertake not for their survival but for the country as a whole.

THE Prophet Muhammad (S.M.) introduced revolutionary reforms, as taught in the Quran which was revealed to the Prophet, and which were to be established. Pre-Islamic Arabian society was ignorant, full of bigotry, had many undesirable customs and traditions, such as no protected status for women, female infanticide, lack of tolerance and mutual understanding, constant family and tribal quarrels and tensions culminating in murder. The aims of the Prophet's reforms were to eliminate all these vices and to inculcate better human feelings and ethical and moral values. The Prophet's basic reforms were and are not confined to any particular society or a particular period, his broad and fundamental reforms are as applicable today to a modern society as there were to a 7th century desert Arab society. As a reputed Western scholar, commenting on the Prophet's far-reaching reforms, said:

The Prophet brought a revolution in Arabian life, a purification that sought to reform and redefine its way of life. False, superstitious practices such as polytheism and idolatry were suppressed. As beliefs were viewed as the worst forms of ingratitude or unbelief (Kufr), for they contradicted and denied the unity or oneness (Tawhid) of God. Association (shirk) of anything with Allah was denounced as the worst of sins, idolatry. For Muhammad (S.M.) the majority of Arabs lived in ignorance (Jahliyya) of Allah and His will as revealed to the Prophets Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Moreover, he believed that both the Jewish and the Christian communities had distorted God's original revelation to Moses and later to

THE PROPHET OF ISLAM

Muhammad (S.M) the Greatest Reformer

by G W Choudhury

Jesus. Thus, Islam brought a reformation: it was the call once again to total submission (Islam) to Allah and the implementation of His will as revealed in its complete form one final time to Muhammad (S.M.) the last, or seal of the Prophets. Thus, for Muhammad (S.M.) Islam was not a new faith, but the restoration of the true faith (Iman) a process that required the reformation of an ignorant deviant society. Repentance, or the heeding of God's warning, required turning away from the path of unbelief and turning toward or returning to the straight path (Sharia) or law of God. This conversion required both individual and group submission to God. Muslims were not only individuals but also a community or brotherhood or believers. They were bound by a common faith and committed to the creation of a socially just society through the implementation of God's will — the establishment of the rule of the kingdom of God on earth.

The Individual

The Prophet Muhammad (S.M.) in his various sermons, discussions and talks with individuals and groups, as well as larger gatherings, stressed the fact that a human being is distinguished from the rest of God's creations because Allah, after creating him, gave His spirit only to the human being. God 'breathed My own spirit' into man (15:29, 38:72). The Quran clearly states that every man and woman individually and every people collectively are

alone responsible for what they do. The human being must protect himself against the harmful and evil consequences of his conduct. When a man or society is fully conscious of this while conducting himself or itself, he or it has true Taqwa — which has been translated as 'conscience'. Conscience is, according to Fazlur Rahman, central to Islam. God has not created man or the universe purposelessly: We have not created the heaven or the universe and what is between them purposelessly (38:37) but with a purpose. The purpose is service of Allah i.e. the implementation of the divine imperative for man, for this service for the benefit of mankind, not for God's. As the Quran puts it: 'Whatever good a person earns is for his own benefit and whatever evil he earns is only against himself.'

The Prophet preached consistently that the Quran taught the equality of all human beings, irrespective of race, colour, sex, religion or language, at a time when universal brotherhood and equality were not the rules of the day. The contemporary world's emphasis on equality and human rights was clearly laid down in the Quran fourteen centuries ago and practised by the Prophet himself. In order to establish a just and fair socio-economic and political order the Quran repeatedly enjoins us to 'command good and forbid evil.'

Muslims assert that the

Quranic message is eternal and universal. The Quran is intended to guide or 'show the way', as the word hidayat implies, to those cherished values and ideals without which human life is not worth living. Human beings, as the highest creatures of God, have, or at least should strive for, certain higher and nobler values and ideals. What are these basic values and ideals and how does Quran teach us to be the torchbearer of these ideals. They include, among others:

1. The quality, dignity and brotherhood of man.
2. The value of universal education, with an emphasis on the spirit of free enquiry and the importance of scientific knowledge.
3. The principle of religious tolerance.
4. The liberation of woman and her spiritual equality with man.
5. Freedom from slavery and exploitation of all kinds.
6. The dignity of manual labour.
7. The integration of mankind in a feeling of oneness, irrespective of differences of race, colour, sex, religion, language, etc.
8. The principle of justice as the foundation of society.

The Quranic message puts all its stress not on the rituals but on the spirit of true religion. Surah Fatihah, with which Muslims are required to begin their prayers five times a day — one of the fundamental ele-

ments of Islam — enjoins man to seek guidance from God, the Merciful.

Now, if the followers of Islam do not merely bow to the west or the east five times a day to fulfil one of the five pillars of Islam, but really bow before God to seek guidance, to seek the 'Straight Path', God will surely guide man to the true path. Once man really knows the 'Straight Path' there is no reason why man will not be able to attain those higher ideals and objectives of the Quranic message. This is the secret of the success of the Quranic message and this is what makes the message universal, eternal.

Surah Fatihah is regarded as the 'short Quran'. It contains all the essential points of the revelation which are elaborated elsewhere. The Prophet elaborated and explained the meaning and significance of the 'Straight Path'. Now what is the 'Straight Path' that Muslims seek from Allah? The Quran emphasises the concept of the 'Straight Path' (1:5) which, in the very nature of the case, denotes the shortest and most direct path. This has been defined as the pursuit of the law of the ideal human nature (30:30), which bears the glory of the impact of what God calls His spirit (ruh) (32:9). The path of religion consists, therefore, not in mysterious dogmas and magical rites but in the fulfillment of human destiny in accordance with the demands of the ideal human nature and human status as the vicegerent of God (which God has bestowed on

man). That necessitates, in its turn, constant exercise in respect of:

1. Acquisition of control of the higher self over the lower self, which always forms the greatest obstacle in the pursuit of all idealistic yearnings — spiritual, moral, intellectual, social and aesthetic — in order to build up human personality in harmony with the demands of ideal human nature.
2. Understanding human personality, nature and history in order to pursue harmony in human society.
3. Efforts in service to and reform of society for the practical establishment of harmony in the social order.
4. The subjugation of nature through the power of knowledge in order to bring nature into harmony with ideal human aspirations.
5. Submission to God, who is the basis of all excellence, the source of all virtues, and the fountainhead of all virtues, thereby to establish harmony with Him, which alone bestows the capability to achieve human destiny.

The Prophet's basic reforms in the field of education, science and technology were immense. Here we conclude by quoting a comment on the Prophet's basic reforms by a Western scholar: He (Muhammad) created a new social system of social security and a new family structure, both of which were a vast improvement on that which went before... he established a religious and social framework of the life of many races of men.

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THE efforts by Greek Orthodox Church to extend its influence in the Balkans has soured Greece's relations with its poor and weak neighbour, Albania.

Since the collapse of Albania's hard-line communism three years ago, the Orthodox Church has moved in to revive the once-repressed faith of the approximately 200,000 ethnic Greeks living in the southern part of the country. But the government in Tirana sees it differently.

In the Albanian view, nationalist elements in Greece are out to ultimately annex Southern Albania, which the Greeks call Northern Epiros as many consider it an extension of the northwestern Greek province of Epiros.

The Greek Orthodox Church, a traditional bulwark of right-wing nationalism, has made no secret of its desire to boost the identity of Albania's ethnic Greek minority.

The simmering tension burst into the open in late June when Albanian police in the largely ethnic Greek city of Gjirokastra expelled a Greek arch-priest who was assigned to the district two years ago, on the grounds that he was allegedly connected to "Greek chauvinist circles." Some clergy are believed to be working with Greece's intelligence services, according to diplomatic sources in Athens.

The expulsion triggered a mass reprisal, as Greek police rounded up thousands of Albanians who over the past two years had entered Greece illegally, to escape poverty at home. In a matter of days at least 10,000 had been bused back to the Albanian border, while the Greek government said its target is to eventually expel the approximately 150,000 Albanians in Greece without a stay permit.

The Greek public has generally applauded the mass expulsions. In the past year, poverty-stricken Albanians have been held responsible for a rise in crime throughout Greece. Labour unions have protested the employment of Albanian workers at very low wages, undercutting the local labour market at a time of growing unemployment.

In words not heard since the iciest days of the Cold War, Athens has accused Tirana of

Religious Rivalry Risks Balkan Balance

John Carr writes from Athens

The collapse of communism in eastern Europe has made way for a religious revival. The Greek Orthodox Church has been extending its influence in the Balkans, especially targeting Albania's ethnic Greek minority. This has soured Greece's relations with the government in Tirana. There is talk, of creating an "Orthodox Axis" that would united Greece, Serbia, southern Albania and Bulgaria.

Frontiers of faith



trampling on the human rights of its ethnic Greek minority. Albania retorts that nationalist circles in Greece are out to eventually gain control of southern Albania, and blames the Greek Orthodox Church for fomenting "anti-Albanian hysteria."

The church's practice of appointing clergy from Greece to fill posts in the Albanian Orthodox Church is particularly galling to the Albanian government, which sees it as blatant

Greek intervention. Before expelling the Greek priest from Gjirokastra, the government had refused to allow three Greek bishops into the country to inaugurate a new church.

The Greek church defends its attempted control of the Albanian church by citing alleged expansionist plans by the Vatican and Islam, both of which also have strong presences in Albania. One leading bishop, in a recent article in a national newspaper, argued for

the creation of what he called an "Orthodox Axis" that would unite the flocks of Greece, Serbia, southern Albania and Bulgaria, and also have political clout.

Of the 800,000 Albanians professing the Orthodox faith (about one-quarter of the population), just 200,000 are ethnic Greeks. The minority are the descendants of northern Greeks who have lived in the region since ancient times.

When the Ottoman Empire broke up in the early years of this century, like other population enclaves they found themselves on the wrong side of artificially-frontiers. More than four decades of Stalinist rule in Albania after World War Two, with its political and cultural repression, failed to extinguish the ethnic Greeks' sense of identity.

In the present wave of ethnic sweeping the Balkans, Greece is unlikely to cease its support of the ethnic Greek minority. Over the past two years tensions have soared with the neighbouring former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, largely over emotional nationalist issues.

The Greek Orthodox Church is unlikely to give up its practice of directly appointing Albania's Orthodox clergy from Athens. One reason cited is the alleged inexperience of the Albanian clergy, which along with other faiths was virtually extinguished under communism.

Last year the Greek media gave prominence to the revival of religious services in Albania, with scenes of crowded churches and aged priests who were allowed to don their sacerdotal robes for the first time in almost half a century. The Istanbul-based Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople appointed the first Archbishop of Albania since 1937, Anastasios Yannoulatos. The Archbishop himself now

says he feels, the hot breath of persecution drawing near. When he tried to personally intercede with the Albanian police to halt the expulsion of the priest from Gjirokastra, he says that a policeman turned on him with the words, "it will be your turn next."

Understandably, he feels, he is called upon to calm hard feelings on both sides. "I believe the whole issue arose out of a misunderstanding," says Archbishop Anastasios. The Ecumenical Patriarchate itself, spiritual fountainhead of 200 million Orthodox around the world, traditionally shunning nationalist passions, has remained silent.

Political factors may also line up Greece against its poor northwestern neighbour. Greece, largely through Orthodox Church influence, has displayed sympathy towards Serbia in the Bosnian conflict. Albania,

anxious about its own ethnic elements in the province of Kosova, is at odds with Serbia.

Tirana recently signed a defence cooperation with Greece's arch foe Turkey, which in turn is accused of stirring up irredentist feeling among the 120,000 Turkish-speaking Muslims in northeastern Greece. This jigsaw has triggered fears in Athens that Turkey may be aiming to set up an "Islamic crescent" in the Balkans, to include the 1.5 million Muslims of Albania, to isolate Greece diplomatically.

Albanian President Sali Berisha, in his effort to keep his diverse religious elements together, appears unwilling to bring tension with Greece to the breaking point. Though he has blamed the Greek government for "demagoguery" on the minority issue, he said "it would be a mistake to blame the (Orthodox) church."

But as long as the Greek church believes it has a sacred mission to fulfil among the thousands who have been deprived of it, and remains suspicious of the Catholics and Muslims, the religious cold war between Athens and Tirana is unlikely to end soon. — GEMINI NEWS

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OPINION

Where do People Turn to?

A F Salahuddin Ahmed

Mr Kuldip Nayyar's article "Four Decades after Independence: Where do People Turn to?" which appeared in The Daily Star of 25 August recounts most tellingly the feelings of many who have lived through the entire period of history. It would appear that the violent upsurge of religious fundamentalism and communal and sectarian madness which have cost so many lives in recent years threaten to tear apart the age-old social and cultural fabric of our South Asian sub-continent and destroy all the human values that we hold dear. Only an objective understanding of history could help us in understanding this threat.

We believe that despite political divisions of 1947 and 1971 the people of the Indian sub-continent now called South Asia do share an indivisible cultural heritage. This heritage is the product of over thousand years of historical development. It is the outcome of a long and continuing process of intermingling of indigenous and external elements. These elements have become inseparable from each other and have contributed to the making of our composite cultural tradition. Vested interests, both indigenous and foreign, have from the time to time sought to destroy this unique tradition by sowing seeds of discord and conflict which have led to communal and sectarian violence bringing untold misery and suffering to the common people. There is a growing realization among all sections of people, particularly the intellectuals, that no major problem of any country of the sub-continent could be solved unilaterally, or by confrontation and conflict; that only through peaceful means, through mutual understanding and cooperation, all sources of discord could be removed.

History tells us that until the advent of British colonial rule, communal antagonism and vio-

lence, as we have known in our time, virtually did not exist. Relations between different religious communities were based largely on understanding and harmony. After the initial period of confrontation and conflict was over, the communities had learned from experience to live in peace. Political antagonism or war among the ruling circles did not affect the common people. The people of the sub-continent whether they are citizens of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, are tired of prolonged tension and conflict that have been raging in many parts of the region. They now want to live in peace which is essential for development and progress.

Continuing tension in the sub-continent has led to arms build-up on an unprecedented scale. Each state is indulging in reckless military expenditure. This tends to weaken civil administration, the foundation of democratic government, and has, in some cases, led to "militarization of the state". This could, as some social scientists have warned us, bring forth a nightmarish state of affairs such as "the brutalization of government and dehumanization of society". We must guard against such development at any cost. Therefore, the imperative need of the moment is to launch a massive movement for promoting peace, understanding and friendship in South Asia.

As a first step it may be suggested that the intellectuals and also representatives of people belonging to different professions of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, should form a Union or Committee to further this objective. We must act now before it is too late.

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To the Editor...

US diplomats resign on the Bosnian issue

Sir, Four courageous US diplomats dealing with the Bosnian holocaust have resigned from their posts in the State Department dissenting on the US policy. President Clinton soon after the assumption of his office was very much inclined for a limited intervention to stop the genocide and fighting in Bosnia. Secretary of State Warren Christopher undertook several journeys to Europe to obtain the support of the European allies. But the response of the Europeans was not only negative, but brutal and inhuman. An unarmed Bosnia was pitted against heavily armed Serbs, who were determined to annihilate an independent state, which was a member of the United Nations. The United Nations dragged its feet, and the aggrandizement and killing of an entire people continued.

The USA and the UN reacted very fast when Iraq occupied Kuwait, and the Iraqis are being

punished continuously. The Serbs continue to be in occupation of Bosnia, and peace efforts are now being made to legalise the occupation of the Serbs. This would prove to be a total moral defeat for the USA and the UN. Sir Winston Churchill had said, "The only true guide in life is to do what is right".

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"Roads on Rent: What Else?"

Sir, This morning (August 29, 1993) while I was coming to office passing through Manik Miah Avenue I was terribly shocked to see the construction of a political party's meeting pandal over a very important road connecting the Airport and the Mirpur roads. In fact, I need to pass through this link road quite a number of times every day. For the last couple of days my disgust and annoyance against the builders of the construction was rapidly accelerating each time I passed the critical juncture. This morning

when my reaction was very high as the area was looking like somebody's paternal property, I was wondering if there was anybody in the country to oppose this irrational development. The moment I entered my office and had a glance over The Daily Star I was extremely delighted to see the post-editorial on "ROADS ON RENT: WHAT ELSE?" by Mr Mahfuz Anam. Again rays of hope found its way into my heart. There are still people who not only watches the wrong-doings of individuals and/or organisations, however mighty he or they may be but also protests with indomitable courage. I must congratulate Mr Anam for his bold, constructive and very timely words towards both the government and the opposition. Whether the concerned parties listen to the suggestion or not the necessary cautions required to be vibrated, projected very well on time. Let the politicians decide their next course of action.

As citizen I do not hesitate to reiterate that there is no alternative to good government who are truly accountable and

respectful to the people of the country. I take the opportunity to urge all concerned to make the concept of good government a reality in the stead of mere tall talks that we have been hearing since 1947.

A Gafur
Dhaka

Bangladeshi protocol

Sir, From time to time when we watch on our BTV the scene of different newly appointed Ambassadors/High Commissioners in Bangladesh presenting their credentials to our President at Bangabhaban, the repetition of one and old manner and style of our protocol look artificial and funny.

Can't our Ministry of Foreign Affairs do away with the artificial formalities and extend Bangladeshi hospitality and protocol to the foreign diplomats?

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