

THE EID FESTIVAL

Reading the Social Text

by Azfar Hussain

ONE of the greatest but mostly taken-for-granted, routine-bound festivals in our life is the Eid festival which has hitherto shaped its almost reflexive pattern fairly familiar to us. Rhythms, rituals, images and customs that are animated and actuated by the Eid festival do not surprise those of us who are used to stock-responses of sorts. In other words, we know what the festival is all about, what it actually wants us to do. For instance, we go to the Eidgah, we meet and visit our friends and relatives, we exchange embraces and greetings and smiles, we put on *pyjama-punjabi*, we take improved diet, and so on. These are, in fact, some of the middle-class familial and social signifiers that have hitherto frozen themselves to indicate that the pattern thus set is one to be repeated and reproduced.

Of course, certain underlying principles of the festival are surely to remain; those are what religion tends to dictate and perpetuate. But, apart from the religious point of view, if we look at the festival from the socio-cultural point of view, we cannot but observe that the festival, say, for the last twenty-five years, has remained almost unchanged. Most of the middle-class and lower-class members seem to feel unambiguously that the Eid festival is nothing but part of an annual routine.

But, what also routinely happens through this festival is that the socio-economic dynamic crystallizes itself in terms of responses cutting across various classes. Indeed, one can read the Eid festival as a social text, as a cultural text, which is likely to bring together signs and symptoms of the existing social relationships, economic structures accompanied by class divisions, and broadly speaking, our cultural life. Viewed in this light, the Eid festival, as it is celebrated in this part of the world, first brings to the fore acute class-divisions that char-

acterize our society. One may raise one's eyebrows heavenward at this point with the very interrogation: why do we have to speak of hunger, economy, politics, class, etc. on such a great day as it is? True, it is more than preposterous for one to talk about a grammatical problem or a mathematical puzzle with one's new bride on the very first night of wedding, though Nirod Choudhury, that eccentric writer caught in the spell of British colonialism, took his wife's general-knowledge-test by asking her the spelling of 'Beethoven' on the very first night, destroying the essence and ethos and spirit of that rare night that slipped by. No, we are not trying to destroy the spirit of the festival that awaits us; but then, to appropriate the pleasure-principle associated with the festival which is but a collective cultural ritual apart from being a religious one, we cannot but look into the responses of people taking part in this ritual. Moreover, festivity does not merely invite unconscious, mindless rejoicing and merry-making; it also encourages celebrations of togetherness and unity animated by warm, active human contacts that are to transcend all possible barriers. Festivity also demands, as a ritual does, those moments of our realization when we can look into ourselves, deeply, closely. Ritual and realization can only mutually add to each other's energy and elan.

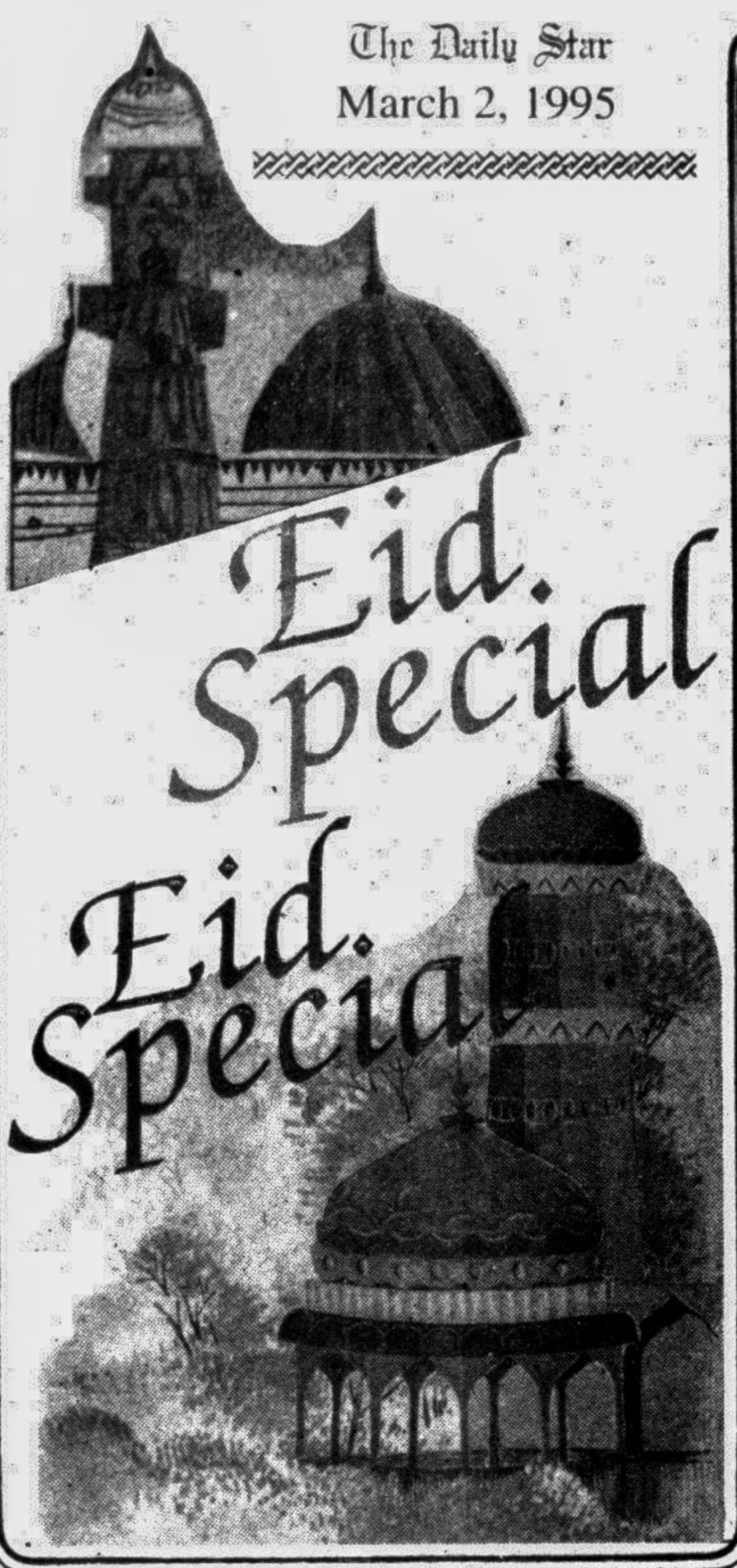
Bibi, a widow and a mother of two children, presently working as a servant at a rich man's residence located in Dhanmandi, simply said: 'Oh, Eid! My children would suffer!' I said: 'How?' She replied uttering nothing but the syllables of silence: 'They would cry for new dress.' Thus, for the lower classes, as it can be unequivocally understood, the Eid festival turns out to be a reminder — a routine one at that — of the actual plight of the poor. In fact, to call a spade a spade, the Eid festival routinely exposes the economic poverty of the majority of the people in Bangladesh where festivity turns out to be a somewhat class-divided social text with the rich and the poor participating in the ritual in their own ways. The rich rejoice. So do only some of the beggars I met the other day told me that he would earn more than usual on the very day of the Eid as he would move around foraging for food and money in the city from dawn to dusk, but particularly concentrating his search and stay in the *Eidgah* where it is somewhat customary to give *paisa* to beggars. Be that as it may, the Eid festival for the lower classes is generally evocative of a hard reality which, on however a limited scale, can evoke the pleasure-principle only through hiding pain and plight beneath the surface. It is also true that a very limited section of the lower classes finds the opportunity during the pre-Eid days and on the day of the Eid itself to earn more than usual; for example, rickshawallas charge fares tellingly more than normal ones.

Now, let us return to the Eid market which has earlier been described in terms of the metaphor of a monster, though this metaphor while making the low-income groups exclaim in the pronunciation of *hannuhal qutub-sayid* does not suffice to express the whole gamut of meanings, methods, madhness and mys-

terious effects ranging from the blackcomic to the surreal. An upper-class young woman I met the other day told me that she would have as many as nine pieces of dress for the coming Eid festival. While I asked her what kinds of designs and fashions she had in mind, she simply said: 'Oh dear, you won't understand their intricacies.' I was wondering if she was speaking of any abstract art-work, or any Picassoesque composition, or any Egyptian hieroglyphic puzzle or any Chinese ideogram as such! However, a little later, I was shown a picture of a woman clad in the kind of dress the young woman desired to have. And the effect it produced on me was an utterly blackcomic one — I was shocked and at the same time, I laughed. One may explain this fashion-shock in terms of the fact that I lack the capacity for becoming a genuine connoisseur of updated dress-fashions; but then, I cannot help feeling that the Eid festival animates dreams and desires, fires and furies in some upper-class fashionable women for hunting dresses which are not only accommodative of borrowed models and designs as far alien as they can be, but are also inordinately expensive. The woman I talked to the other day told me that one of the nine pieces of her dress would cost her more than Taka 20,000!

True, where there is money, there is magic, there is miracle, there is even melodrama — and there is festival, too. Yet, the Eid festival comes as an unavoidable ritual for those who do not have the money. With whatever pain and plight they can bear, the poor participate in the ritual in the form of seeking food and money from whatever sources they can possibly find. And the middle-class routinely responds to the ritual in terms of exchanging greetings with friends and relatives and visiting them, and eating whatever improved diet they can possibly afford.

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Eid-ul-Fitr

by Faruquddin Ahmed

The wintry winds are gone for at least a year. Aird Falgoon is here to herald the new spring. Chirping birds, booming flowers and the friendly weather. All sing a tune so welcome to the common man. Life looks like being back to pleasure and jubilation. With Eid-ul-Fitr, knocking at the door. An occasion to celebrate and share with all. Whatever we have, between the haves and the havenots. For the bounties of nature, the gifts of God. Are not the right of only just a few ones. The poor are poor because we all do ignore. Our duty towards the society, the nation all the more.

Unshared Joy is No Joy

by Shah Husain Imam

Every religion has a joyous day for its followers. Muslims have Eid-ul-Fitr; the Christians, Christmas; Hindus, Vijaya Dashami or Dussera; Buddhists, Buddha Purnima; Sikhs, Guru Nanak Day; Jains, Diwali; Zoroastrians, Naoroz; and the Jews, Rosh-ha-Shana, their New Year's Day in autumn.

Most of these special days are either birthdays of architects of religions, as with Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity; or, are celebrative of other auspicious high points, as in the case of Hinduism and Jainism; or, by way of rejoicing in their new years, such as one finds in Zoroastrianism and Judaism.

Eid-ul-Fitr does not only bring the month-long-fasting to a happy conclusion, it is also set against the backdrop of the month of Ramadan which saw the revelation of the Holy Book — *The Quran*.

Having said that, it will be worthwhile, in a world of many communities, to note that all religions give pure joy a very high place in their philosophies. That is not because of any conscious decision to emphasise differences with other religions; although admittedly, these were gifted as rewards for abiding by religious injunctions as well as meant to enhance brother-

hood within a community. Since life has a larger share of pathos than happiness and the humdrum of self-management is overwhelmingly taxing on us, a big festive occasion comes as a great relief.

All of these special days have a far-reaching quality about them — as within communities and as between one community and another. Unshared joy is incomplete joy, it can at best be selfish.

Eid-ul-Fitr comes after a month-long self-denial in empathy with those who cannot afford two square meals a day, let alone meet other basic needs. Similarly, the festivals occasions of other religions exude geniality towards the less fortunate.

Pure joy has proved to be markedly cross-cultural: There have been instances in mankind's history that slugging matches between communities came to a pause out of respect for each other's festive occasions.

There is something of a potentially magnetic appeal to a big religious festival: People of different communities have hardly ever failed to greet each other on such an occasion. These nice feelings need to be encouraged to strengthen communal harmony.

The shopping spree for Eid-ul-Fitr has had, as always,

moral and economic implications. "Celebrate it according to your capacity" — is the rule of the thumb. This is actually a re-phrased version of cutting one's coat according to one's cloth. What however we do see around us, as the Eid draws near, is a prodigal over-expenditure to a point of family bankruptcy. This is unforgivable if the spenders are men and women of modest means, what with their bonuses. It has been atrocious for the rich if the spending was not strictly need-based; because their reckless spending could have worsened the inflationary pressure that had built in the economy anyway.

Spending small money to possess little things one had always longed for or tiny give-aways to poor people could be really soul-soothing. Over-expenditure has an awkward demonstrative effect on the have-nots, precisely with whom the fasters had struck an empathetic note by going without food and water for hours spread over a full month. Non-fasters should have felt doubly obliged to be sympathetic to the poor.

It is said that fulfilment of religious obligations does not pass the test if it had been through an expenditure of unearned incomes. That's a point worth pondering.



Last minute shopping of the traditionally main food item 'shema'; Customers from all walks of life crowd a city bazaar shop.

terious of the market itself. For some, the Eid market, crammed and crowded as it remains throughout the month of Ramadan, immediately turns out to be a melodramatically potential stage of open competitions. Indeed, the rich section of our society exhibits a certain kind of hysteria of shopping — spatially and temporally monopolizing the market which, in fact, becomes both a medium and a message in the McLuhanesque sense. And the message is simply this: 'I can buy more than you can'; and thus, the competition, certainly based on a kind of ego-instigated, money-maddened pleasure-principle, goes untrammelled, while sharpening and mirroring the incapability, insufficiency and frustration of the lower classes who remain consistent victims of the Eid market that ceaselessly dramatizes the relationship between the executioner, and the executed. Indeed, prices themselves, whimsically winging heavenward, turn out to be blood-eyed butchers for the low-income groups, while such prices almost undisturbingly come to friendly terms with the rich — laughing, merry-making, competing, buying, and even selling. Sellers, too, stage their own kind of melodrama. The Eid market gives them the opportunity to play the executioner with all the zeal and zest for profit: while, with the reckless soaring of the prices of the essentials, the very business of living for the poor becomes the art and science of putting a viable stay against existential extinction. For them, the festival takes more than what it gives, and the ideal of the festival — to celebrate the joy of togetherness and unity — gets defeated by the gap between winking prices and limping purchasing capacities actuated by the profit-engineering market which, in the first place, does not practise any form of *siyam* throughout the month of Ramadan. One can certainly go on to say that the market itself turns out to be the greatest enemy of the Eid festival in a country where poverty and discriminations keep people alienated, divided, disintegrated, and enmeshed in the network of heavily polarized socio-economic power; while the market no doubt appears to be half-fellow-well-met with the rich.

The Wind of the Spirit and New Values

by Abul Ashraf Noor

The wind of the spirit that lies ahead
Reflects new souls
I expect nothing but the best
From the spiritual values
Marking their impact on our people's lives
Easy to recognize them
As symbols of faith, vision and unity
Asking for new values of materialism.

The reality of hunger and exploitation changes
With the change of time and place
All over the crowded areas of the globe
Yet they offer spiritual values
To show something admirable
About humanity in terms of virtues
And vices in our times.

For me, the wind of the spirit complies
And I feel obligated to applaud
The spirit of change with the wind
Of the spirit for creating the conscience
Of the world not as an excuse for brutality
Of population explosion, but for seeking
God's mercy and His magical benevolence
To know all about the secrets of Nature

Eid Mubarak



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Eid Mubarak

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