

Happy Eid to All

Eid-ul-Fitr, bereft of the ritual sacrifice as in Eid-ul-Azha, has already become a national festival. This has been a most benign shift, socially and politically.

Other changes have also been taking place. This spending spree, this expression of *bon homie* hitting the sky, this race towards glamour and ostentation — these are all new. And these do not go well with either the cultural temper of the Bangalee people or with the religious spirit that is at the root of these festivals.

Absence of festivals on the Bangalee's national scale created very many gaps in the social as well as individual needs of our people for a fuller life. The spasmodic and cathartic transformation of the society for half a week twice or thrice a year does fulfil those needs by a large measure. And it is but natural things would be overdone for some time. Everyone is in a mad rush for some extra money, money to spend. And extra money has a way of being available only through criminal or at best socially incongenial ways. The Eid week works up a frenzy in all and crime also enjoys a frenzied proliferation.

Islam, as its precursor Christianity, was a poor man's religion — a rising of the oppressed and exploited that shook societies into a new dynamism and eventually set milestones of civilisation and culture. Eid in Bangladesh, letting its pristine simplicity, is fast becoming indistinguishable from the Christmas of the Christians of the European stock in terms of buying things. For good or bad, who knows.

What is this festivity for in the first place? It truly celebrates a month of continence — self-denial and self-abnegation. Of giving oneself wholly to God and whatever is good for all. If Ramadan fails to make a new person of us all, these celebrations and festivities would lose their very soul. Ramadan does not say be good for a month. It initiates one into goodness and modesty and a rejection of covetousness. If it could effectively do that we could have a paradise *fidduniya*. Howmever we enjoy ourselves during the Eids, a caring remembrance of the soul of the Ramadan and the truer significance of sacrifice could do immense good to us.

Our Eid greetings and good wishes to all.

Nari Samaj's Call

1997 was an annus mirabilis of sorts when it comes to repression against women. Out of 753 cases recorded, 517 were incidents of physical molestation which means more than one woman was raped or dishonoured a day in the year just gone. Such statistics which was revealed by a women's rights group — Sammilita Nari Samaj — in a press conference on Tuesday last, made for a chilling commentary on security of women in our society and calls for an attitudinal transformation on the part of the authorities and the think-tank in the government.

A particularly pertinent point that was driven home in this context was law makers' muddled thinking regarding crime against women. The government initiative to remove gender discrimination from the society epitomised in the Woman and Child Repression Act 1995 tends to lose its seriousness and sharpness due to authorities' tagging the terrorism related crime with the amendment.

We fully endorse Sammilita Nari Samaj's view on the matter. Repression against women, raping to be precise, has become too big a social evil to demand a law in its own right. This is all the more important in a country where over the years the members of the law enforcing agency have shown an increasing propensity to get involved in cases of repression against women. It ought to be remembered here that ours is a male dominated society and it simply does not have the sensitivity to emotionally accommodate the trauma and outrage a woman undergoes in a case of molestation. Naturally, if there is a want of sharply focused specific laws to deal with the cases chances are that this enormity will only increase. We feel there is no way the authorities can indulge in smug complacency over the matter. Unless a social battle armed with firm legal teeth can be started now our society runs the risk of being disintegrated.

It is a pity that in a country where the Prime Minister and the leader of the opposition are women, such gross crimes against women are slowly becoming a way of life in Bangladesh. Only after, as some of the speakers observed, a consensus stemming from sensitivity to women has developed that things might look up.

And it cannot wait.

Why Not Go by Standard

In pedagogic circles none is supposed to force an issue nor anyone to declare a reactive ultimatum to it. And were these to happen in BUET of all the universities, which stood out of the bunch for its quiet efficiency, the degree of bafflement would know no bounds. Unfortunately this has been exactly our predicament lately with that otherwise well-led and professionally run engineering and technology university.

The architecture faculty chagrined to the last man at the BUET academic council's new admission rule requiring a physics background for entry into the architectural course wants it withdrawn by February 2 or else they would pull out of university activities. The BUET academic council turned a deaf ear to their 'note of dissent' while mooting the new admission rule — mind you, for none other than the architecture department itself. The non-architect councillors in a majority adopted the rule at the academic council hurting the sensibilities of a minority who were directly involved in the matter.

Their tormentor's argument is that since courses on Mechanical and Structural Engineering are also open to students of architecture, a grounding in physics would be useful, supposedly, in case of transfer.

Architecture has a strong artistic and aesthetic staple. Anyhow, let's find out how other universities have set their admission rules for the architecture faculty and take a cue from them.

Fiasco at Bangladesh Bank

An unfortunate incident took place at the Bangladesh Bank, country's central bank, on the 19th instant. As a sequel to an unfulfilled demand by one of the employees unions for placement of some officers in certain coveted positions, stalwarts of the Bangladesh Bank Employees Association forcibly entered the office of the General Manager in charge of administration, abused him thoroughly, ransacked his office and manhandled him badly. The frightened beleaguered officer managed to escape somehow and sought refuge in the office of the Governor of the Bank for physical protection. The ordeal was not over. The marauding crowd pursued the fleeing officer, burst into the office of the Governor, and hurled abuses and insults on their chief executive indiscriminately.

The second episode occurred when members of the Bangladesh Bank Karmachari Samity, the rival association, came out in the open against the attacking crowd. The fight that ensued resulted in casualties, hospitalisation, suspension of some officials and arrest of some others. Police hesitated to take cases filed by the Bank authorities and also by the CBA, the officially recognised trade union of the employees in the Bank, against some officials involved in the incident. The police also refrained from arresting some of the accused, though they were seen to have been roaming in front of them, participating in subsequent demonstrations, due to what they stated as per directives of 'superiors'. On the other hand, the police held some other officials belonging to the opposing or the aggrieved party.

The government constituted a commission to investigate into the incident and to submit its report urgently. Meanwhile, the General Manager, who had been mishandled, has been replaced and the administration itself has been placed with a higher official, an executive director. The Finance Ministry took advantage of the situation, proscribed all trade union activities and ordered the CBA and all union offices to be locked. The probe committee has since submitted its reports and, consequently, 19 officials involved have either been suspended or served with notice to show cause.

An analysis of the events reveals some important points. Firstly, it proves the fact that resort to intimidation and violence to realise unreasonable demands by a group of individuals, in this case being the unions, which is the *modus operandi* of terrorists, has entered all sectors of the economy so much so that even the apex body of banks and financial institutions of the country has not been spared from it. The central bank of the country has now become a victim. Its sanctity has been ravaged and its chief has been insulted and physically threatened by his own employees. Deterioration of the law and order situation caused deep concern among the employees and adversely affected the morale and work environment of the mother bank of the country.

Secondly, the other banks and financial institutions are sure to have some repercussions of the incident. Bangladesh Bank guides, regulates and controls other commercial, investment and social banks as well as other financial institutions and exchange houses. It serves as a model to them and any act of indiscipline on the part of certain elements at the head of a body does not, to say the least, encourage similar elements in the rest of the body to manifest as shining examples of discipline.

Thirdly, it is not unreasonable to assume that foreign donors, financial institutions and investors would now be asking themselves if it were prudent and desirable to go ahead with their plans of action to help the financial sector and the economy in general. They will certainly not abandon their commitments and enthusiasm, but they might pause and ponder before activating themselves in full gear. The IMF and the World Bank are not satisfied with our performance. The precarious foreign exchange reserves at present which cannot meet our import

requirements for even three months compelled the government to invoke aid from the IMF to bail them out of the situation even earlier. Commitment, disbursement and utilisation of annual foreign aid have been lower than those in the previous year. The Chief of World Bank Mission recently held a meeting with the Hon'ble Prime Minister to give vent to his feelings on these and the overall unsatisfactory economic and financial situation in the country. Any deficiency in the proper and smooth functioning of the Bangladesh Bank is, therefore, likely to further erode confidence and ability of subordinate banks to undertake their normal functions to boost the economy through loans, notwithstanding lack of liquidity, and other measures.

Fourthly, this incident has reinforced the deep-rooted apprehension of a large section of the populace about fairness and propriety of attitude and action of the police. According to reports, the police while accepting the cases filed by the Bangladesh Bank authorities ignored and refrained from arresting those who were accused by the Bank. On the contrary and strangely enough, they arrested some of the officials who had been targets of initial assaults. Such discriminatory actions of the police, at the behest of whoever may it be, has become widespread throughout the country and is no longer strange now. All these happened, believably, because of instructions, though not written ones, emanating from the higher authorities. It does not take long to figure out for anyone who these higher authorities are. People do know this type of undue use of law enforcing agents is taking place rampantly in many places in the country, but they are surprised this happened under their very nose, in the heart of the city and in no place other than on the premises of the most protected and the most precious custodian of nation's financial wealth.

Finally, the prompt remedial action taken by the government to ban the CPD and various unions as well as to prohibit trade union activities in the Bank has evinced generally positive reaction. A stern action taken by the government of the late Justice Sattar, in a similar situation, by axing hundreds or thousands of Bank employees received similar acclaim. Fruits of his action, however, could not be reaped for long, as the subsequent government of President Ershad reinstated a bulk of the sacked employees. Although holding of processions on the Bank premises had been prohibited, implementation of this and other restrictions was, indeed, very poor, rather non-existent.

In that context, government actions appear justifiable. On the other hand, as the CPD election had won by pro-BNP Bangladesh Bank Karmachari Samity and the conflict had been initiated by the defeated pro-Awami League Bangladesh Bank Employees Association, in the opinion of some critics, government gleefully took the action promptly in the name of banking reforms and demands of the IMF and the World Bank.

Irrespective of the real motive the proscription of trade union activities in the Bank is a welcome step forward. Horrific stories have come to people's notice now as to the unhealthy and corrupt atmosphere which had been created by allowing the spread of strong tentacles of trade union activities in banks throughout the country. The union officials spare little efforts and less time to promote their collective well-being. Their main objectives and actions are generally geared to aggrandise their own material interests through obtaining mostly improper loans and other favours by exercising undue influence. Despite dependence of our major political parties on such pressure groups for various reasons, one should try to dissuade them from resorting to activities which are not in the real interest of the nation. At the same time, union officials should be encouraged to engage themselves in activities as true members of the respected banking sector of the economy.

To the Editor...

No Mr Choudhury, No!

Sir, Mr Saber Hussain Choudhury, the President of the Bangladesh Cricket Board, was delivering his inaugural speech in the State Minister for Youth and Sports at Hotel Sonargaon in honour of the cricket teams participating in the Independence Cup cricket held in Dhaka. I had, thinking in retrospect, the misfortune of being present in the banquet. He said, 26-year-ago India and Pakistan fought a war against each other through which Bangladesh was born. Today, 26-year down the line, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are sitting under the same roof etc.

I wasn't interested to hear anymore. No Mr Choudhury, no! Bangladesh was not born because of a war between India and Pakistan. It was because the people of Bangladesh wanted so, and fought a protracted war against Pakistan with all their might that Bangladesh won its freedom. Verily India had supported us in this, first morally, then materially and finally militarily.

I protest in the strongest terms such distortion of history. I hope people in responsible positions would be more careful in future while deliberating on such fundamental issues.

A Citizen
Dhaka

It was superb cricket

Sir, I am sick and tired of reading Ms AZ's article in your esteemed daily. Is there anything or any topic in the world she does not know to pass her judgement upon? from beggars to billionaires, from cabbages to columnists, from crap to cricket! The final match between India and Pakistan was the best we ever saw and yes, it was superb cricket and much more (thank you Daily Star).

Ms AZ is forever dwelling in the past, going on and on about her life in the UAE, and in Canada in her columns pray us poor readers, why the poor soul has chosen to come and settle down in our poor little Bangladesh where nothing seems to please her?

We wish Ms. Zakiuddin would stick to her subject, whatever that may be, and spare us the pain of going through her rambling every week. Not that I have to read it though!

Mrs Khan
Dhanmandi, Dhaka

Pakistan must apologise

Sir, The Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif recently at the banquet in his honour at the Bangabhaban categorically accepted the denial of the 1970 election results by the then Pakistan regime. Thus making the Bangalees suffer the wrath of Pakistan Armed Forces' brutal atrocity to remain subservient to them. Mr Sharif is an intelligent person and knows our history and therefore it is not surprising that he was the first Pakistani leader to openly say this much. What is now left for him is to of-

Quality Coals and Hard Rocks

BARAPUKURIA Coal Mine is the first of its kind in Bangladesh. At its full development, at least 10,000 miners will be employed. At the wage rate of Tk. 100 per day, 300 working days, Tk. 300 million worth of disposable income will be generated, each year, within the confines of the mining town. In terms of employment, this would be the largest venture of the country. Also, it is not once-for-all project type of income and employment generation. The coal mine should last 100 years, if not more. The employment would be on a permanent basis.

Coal is a source of energy and the alternative natural gas is much more acceptable from environmental point of view. After opening of the bridge across river Jamuna, the gas pipeline would soon reach North Bengal. Therefore, the argument runs, burning gas, instead of coal, to generate electricity for Rajshahi Division may be cost-effective as well as environmentally sound and sustainable.

The power plant close to the mine head will save transport cost and should be equally cost effective. The sulfur content of Barapukuria coal is negligible, resulting in minimum pollution. The most important consideration in favour of a coal fired power plant is its employment effect. Use of natural gas, instead of coal will generate even one-tenth of that employment.

There is a tremendous shortage of bio-mass in the country. Few months back, in a mango orchard within a distance of 20 kilometers from Barapukuria, I found at least 20 children busy picking up the fallen brown leaves, instead of attending the school near by. There is a strong competition to gather fuel for cooking and the orchard ground looked clean — devoid of a single fallen leaf.

Before partition in 1947, coal

from mines in Bihar and West Bengal used to be available all over North Bengal. The pressure on bio-mass as a source of fuel was consequently much less. Today, after half a century, the population has increased three times and there is no coal stove anywhere. North Bengal is practically denuded of fuel wood. The grave and serious implications should clearly be understood. There seems to be no concern by anyone whatsoever. The fuel wood famine forces children of poor landless families to abstain from schools since scavenging for leaves and twigs is far more important for bare survival than attending schools. Barapukuria coal must be made widely available for domestic use and lessen the pressure on bio-mass. Cost of fuel wood would consequently go down. An effective substitute fuel for cooking is possible and why we shouldn't go for it as quickly as possible.

Widespread marketing of coal for domestic and household use all over Bangladesh will be facilitated by the location of Barapukuria mine very close to the Parbatpur Railway Junction. It would facilitate distribution of coal all over the country, by using both the broad and metre gauge lines. Moreover, retailing of coal will be a new business and create thousands of outlets — adding further to employment and income.

Coal can be the basis of other industries as well. Iron ore can be imported from India by the Railways and together with Barapukuria coal, form the ideal basis for large scale steel production in Bangladesh. Remember, the Pohang Steel Mill of South Korea was opposed by the World Bank? It was ignored by the government. Today, the huge Korean basic steel industry, based on imported iron ore, constitute the mainstay of the export-led expansion of light manufac-

ture. Political implications of regressive inactions should be clearly understood by all concerned.

Simply stated, quality coal and high grade granites open up immense possibilities in such an area of Bangladesh where not a single large scale industry or for that matter any other significant enterprise have come on stream since liberation in 1971. Dinajpur remained one of the most backward districts of the country. Mining development gives the area a golden opportunity to grow and prosper. Let us not forget that regional disparities quickly develop into bombs ready for explosion at any time. We suffered in the past from such economic exploitation and denial of massive industrialisation in Dinajpur amounts to newsworthy policies in favour of enhanced disparities. Political implications of regressive inactions should be clearly understood by all concerned.

Once in a New Moon...

FUNNY, but some people take things far too seriously. Like this North American friend of mine. He needs to lighten up a little.

You do what the evening before Eid? You sight the new moon? he asks with some surprise. We are waiting for word from the Scarborough Islamic Centre, in Toronto, about whether it is going to be Eid-ul-Fitr the next day or not, and I am trying to explain what it is like back home in Bangladesh.

I ought to explain that Daniel (not his real name) is one of my more enlightened friends in Canada. But even he has difficulty appreciating the concept.

Okay, look at it this way, I say to him. From your point of view, yes, this may be a terribly inefficient way to plan a national holiday, but it works because everyone knows it is going to work in that particular way. We all know we're not going to know until the last minute. That is why we spend the first part of the evening watching the sky. Everyone does this. (Or used to, when I left Dhaka some 25 years ago).

You mean, you can't celebrate the festival until the moon has been seen, physically? Everyone waits until that happens, patiently? Daniel asks, incredulously.

Well, if you must know, some people are not so patient.

Mother, for instance, is always tense as the fast on the 29th day of Ramadan ends and the kitchen gets crowded with all kinds of speciality foods for Eid lunch — a huge family affair — the next day. She doesn't say anything out loud, but you can hear her muttering about people who can't make up their minds on time. She's cross with the powers that be (and knowing Mother, she doesn't care who they are) as she waits for the sound of the siren.

The siren? Daniel has difficulty getting the words out. I can see he's considerably taken aback.

Consequently, I have to start with first principles. Explain the Muslim adhan, or call to prayer, add to it details about the five daily prayers, especially the evening or maghrib prayer, and the evening siren which goes off in order to let a wider audience know that it is now time to break the daily fast and say your maghrib prayer. The siren also sounds when the New Moon has been 'sighted'.

If they don't decide in the next half hour, I'm never going to have everything ready by tomorrow! Mother says to no one in particular. That's because there is no one around in the dining room or in our kitchen.

Seconds after the fast ends, we all head upstairs to the roof of our house. I race my older sister, who wins. A bus carries my little brother up. Father stands by himself, to one side. My bus holds me, afraid that I may trip and fall off the edge. We all strain our necks, and eyes.

Seen it! my sister shrieks and everyone on the rooftop swings sharply towards her, then towards the sky, in the spot towards which she points. Silence. Then my old bus sniffs. She is as old as the hills, but her eyes are razor sharp. 'Nothing, there,' she says, flatly. False alarm. I smile smugly at my sister.

I'm getting restless now, jumping up and down, tapping my feet and annoying my sister who complains to Father that I am disturbing her. My bus tries to hold me still but I wriggle free and do a little dance in front of my sister, just to bother her some more.

Father bends down and tells me, slowly and patiently, to try and search for a thin sliver of silver, like a magical thread of hair, which is what the New Moon looks like when you see it

ing. The World Bank recommended strategy of growth, may not be adequate for Bangladesh — the ninth most populous country of the world. Our development priorities, if we should quadruple our per capita income over the next two decades, must be well diversified. In this process, light manufacturing alone is not good enough. Coal opens up the opportunities for both employment creation and industrialisation on a broad front. Moreover, coal can save our bio-mass and utter misuse of cow dung as a fuel — thus contributing to the growth in agriculture.

The Barapukuria coal mine is going to be operational very soon and start accumulating mountains of coal over ground since the corresponding power plant is yet to be constructed — in fact, it has not yet gone beyond the planning stage.

As explained, it is not only generation of electricity for which mining of coal, its use in

electricity generation and its retail marketing for domestic use — should all proceed in harmony and contributions from our natural resources to GDP growth is maximised. The objective should be multidimensional, unlike the present single dimension view of coal versus natural gas for electricity generation only.

The hard rocks of Madhyapara are another vital natural resource whose exploitation is being delayed due to conspicuous lack of timely decision.

The rocks have to be viewed as a basic construction material