

essay

Heavenly Freedom at Midnight!

by Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah

"Nothing is so firmly believed as what we least know" *æ Michel De Montaigne*

THIS is not a sequel to Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre's book entitled "Freedom at Midnight." This tale is about another kind of freedom æ heavenly and blissful æ that transcendence only from seventh heaven when folks think they are doing righteous thing. Tragically though, often the newly found freedom can translate into wanton aggression. That is exactly what did happen in northern suburb of Dhaka on July 3, Saturday.

Common violence that we are aware of is not the domain of only miscreants and anti-social elements anymore. Sometimes otherwise perfectly normal people may also become violent and do unusual thing under the spell of zealous. Well, that is what exactly happened in Badda.

Violence is becoming so commonplace in Bangladesh that if you think only streetwise *Mastans* in Bangladesh could embroil in fistfights, then think again. As the society is bolting towards the "cherished goal" of incivility, the activists

Mullahs are not far behind the petite *Mastans*. They are religiously learning the art of hooliganism. If you think I am making all this up then read the rest.

ous news so far this year emanating from Bangladesh. Are you ready for this one. Let us have the drum roll please! *Trirram..Trirram..Trirram..*

Folks, two rival groups of *Mullahs* staged a "Heavenly Fight" in the midnight of all places in the most posh area of Dhaka. If the *Mullahs* were fighting among themselves in obscure part of Bangladesh or even in Karwan Bazaar or Old Dhaka area, I could have taken it. But when the news came that two rival factions of *Mullahs* were fighting with makeshift weapons like sticks, staves, and whatnot in Baridhara area then it must be an earth shattering news. According to a news published in *New Nation* on July 5, the Gulshan Police Station had to dispatch a contingent of policeman to bring order and a semblance of humanity among some distraught *Mullahs*. In general, the Madrassah graduates are very docile folks, but if someone sparks a fire inside their heart and mind, the result could be disastrous, to say the least.

But hearing the news of this combatative bunch others may opine that not all *Mullahs* of Bangladesh are peace-loving folks. How funny and pathetic it is that they fought with their own folks? I could still comprehend that *Mullahs* may occasionally fight with secularist just like the way verbal skirmishes used to break out in NFB forum from time to time between fundamentalists and secularists; we haven't seen lately one of those fights. Perhaps living in a civil society for so long in the West, the *Mullahs* and secularists alike have become more civil these days.

But give me a break now! In a long time I haven't heard anything like this. The distraught *Mullahs* from one faction must be hating the other faction, because a little spark was all that necessary to erupt a fight in Baridhara area near Dhaka's most posh residential area. According to a *New Nation* report what did go wrong was the following: Two competing Mosques in Badda area were Shahdadpur Mosque (Mahfil group) and Momin-Ul-Islam Madrassah (Tabligh group). The Mahfil group had organized a Waaz Mahfil at the Mosque premise at midnight on Saturday (July 3) in which the Imam had chanted some anti-Tabligh and pro-Eid-e-Miladunnabi slogans. When the news of offending slogans reached the rival faction through the courtesy of not-so-modern technology æ the loud-speaker æ a large number of teachers and students of the nearby Baridhara and Momin-Ul-Islam Madrassah equipped with bricks, sticks, and chapatis went there and chased the Imam. Incidentally, who knows, these days *Mullahs* could have used the latest technology in communication, the cellphone!

The intensity of the heavenly midnight brawl among these two fundamentalists groups was so fierce that at one point nine people including two teachers were severely injured. Both Gulshan and Badda police had arrested 23 *Mullahs* for violating the law and order at the mahfil premise. Later, police were maintaining vigilance at Mosque premise, the epicenter of the commotion, to diffuse any further tension.

From the new nation report it seems as if most arrested people belonged to the aggressor party, the Tablighis belonging to the Momin-Ul-Islam Madrassah.

The bone of contention

Folks, realize it or not there are two main schools of thoughts prevalent in Bangladesh as far as Islam is concerned. The old school, the Shariati, had its roots in Deoband, India. In pre-partition India scores of young *Mullahs* used to go to Deoband to get religious indoctrination and training. The Deobandis, as they were called those days, were the pillars of Islam all over Bengal. After the partition in 1947 the Deobandis formed their own schools where they trained the future *Mullahs* of East Pakistan and Bangladesh. The Islam they follow is not exactly the Islam of Wahabites (The Saudis). Some of the Persian Sufi influence had imbued into Deobandis thinking. It is not uncommon for Deobandis to get too much involved in performing Milad and Jiqqa besides offering salat five-times a day. So, one may refer to this school as "Folk-Islam." The main vehicle of preaching according to this group is "Waaz mahfil," where all kinds of lurid stories are described in vivid detail to invoke faith in people. The shock therapy often works among doubters and half-believers.

The second school of thought came, again from India, in early sixties. This group is called "Jamaat-Al-Tabligh." They first started the movement in a Mosque near Ramna, Dhaka. This place is called "Kakrail Mosque." It is

more of puritan kind of Islam with a tinge of Wahabi-thinking. These folks are trying to rid the folk elements of the present-day Islam in entire South Asia. This purifying of Islam back to Shariat and Hadith level is popularly called the "Tablighi-Jamaat" or simply "Tablighi Movement." The missionary zeal is very strong among Tablighi folks. They often go from door to door preaching people through intense peer-pressure. In Bangladesh and in rest of the world this "Tablighi Movement" has become a strong force. It is very common these days to see that retired government officers, army officials, other folks are joining en masse this movement after leading a hedonistic life in their halcyon days of youth and mid-life. The Tablighi group also started another eye-catching festival that they call "Bishwa Iftema" or "World Congregation." The Tablighis meet once a year in open air congregation on the bank of Turag River in Tongi, a satellite town North of Dhaka. An estimated one million people have participated on the last day of week-long preaching session in this year's Iftema.

The bone of contention between these two competing groups is the celebration of prophet Mohammed's birthday in Bangladesh. The Deobandis or mahfil group encourages people to celebrate Mohammed's birthday that they lovingly call "Eid-e-Miladunnabi." This must irritate the Tablighis. Besides, the Tablighis abhor the "Waaz mahfil." Like a tug-of-war, while one group is trying to purify Islam by ridding the Sufi influence of the present-day Islam, the

other group is fighting tooth and nail to preserve the traditional "Folk-Islam."

Boy! Did they clash at Midnight?

You can say any number of things to fighting *Mullahs* of Bangladesh, but one thing is for certain. They are very civil. They do their fights under the veil of midnight.

On June 3, midnight, when the Imam from Shahdadpur Mosque belonging to "mahfil" group (Folk-Islam) gave a clarion call for celebrating Eid-e-Miladunnabi with full galore, that call sounded more like a "Kafir's Slogan" to the ear of Tablighis at Momin-Ul-Islam Madrassah. Now the *New Nation* report mentioned to the effect that the zealot *Mullah* from "mahfil" camp had uttered bad words about the "Tablighis" (a no-no in Bangladesh!). The result was disastrous. The eager to fight crowd from Madrassah came to a different turf after gathering homemade weapons of crude kind. Their zealous was so intense that they became aggressor and they chased the Imam out of the celebration ground. What a pity! Thanks heaven that we still have laws in Bangladesh and police is there to maintain law and order when situation goes out of kilter.

Mind you that like you and I *Mullahs* are also human being with flesh, blood, and raw emotions. They may have chosen the roads of heavenly path (while you and I have trodden the domain of hedonism and other worldly sins), nevertheless, they still live in the mortal world full of emotions. So, when one group use foul and disparaging remarks to demean the other group, the end result is a brawl. As long as these two groups exist side-by-side, they are bound to collide. While they settle their old scores with bricks and mortars, and lathis, we secularists can poke fun at them watching their incongruous behavior in the midnight hopefully under the full moon.

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musings

The Greater Common Good

By Arundhati Roy

Continued from last week
IRRIGATION without drainage is like having a system of arteries and no veins. Pretty damn pointless.

Since the World Bank stepped back from the Sardar Sarovar Projects, it's a little unclear where the money for the drainage is going to come from. This hasn't deterred the government from going ahead with the Canal work. The result is that even before the dam is ready, before the Wonder Canal has been commissioned, before a single drop of irrigation water has been delivered, water-logging has set in. Among the worst affected areas are the resettlement colonies.

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and people?

When they can't even prevent the Big Dam itself from breaking off in bits when it rains?

To quote from one of their own studies: "The design, the implementation and management of the integration of groundwater and surface water in the above circumstance is complex."

Agreed.

To say the least. Their recommendation of how to deal with the complexity: "It will only be possible to implement such a system if all groundwater and surface water supplies are managed by a single authority."

Agreed!

It's beginning to make sense now. Who'll own the water? The Single Authority. Who'll sell the water? The Single Authority. Who'll profit from the sales? The Single Authority. The Single Authority has a scheme whereby it will sell water by the litre, not to individuals but to farmers' cooperatives (which don't exist just yet, but no doubt the Single Authority can create Cooperatives and force farmers to cooperate?). Computer water, unlike ordinary river water, is expensive. Only those who can afford it will get it.

Gradually, small farmers will get edged out by big farmers, and the whole cycle of uprootment will begin all over again.

The Single Authority, because it owns the computer water, will also decide who will grow what. It says that farmers getting computer water will not be allowed to grow sugarcane because they'll use up the share of the thirsty millions at the tail end of the canal. But the Single Authority has already given licences to 10 large sugar mills right near the head of the canal.

On an earlier occasion, the Single Authority said only 30 per cent of the command area of the Ukai Dam would be used for sugarcane. But sugarcane grows on 75 per cent of it (and 30 per cent is water-logged). In Maharashtra, thanks to a different branch of the Single Authority, the politically powerful sugar lobby that occupies one-tenth of the state's irrigated land uses half the state's irrigation water.

In addition to the sugar growers, the Single Authority has recently announced a scheme that envisages a series of five-star hotels, golf-courses and water parks that will come up along the Wonder Canal. What earthly reason could possibly justify this?

The Single Authority says it's the only way to raise money to complete the project!

I really worry about those millions of good people in Kutch and Saurashtra.

Will the water ever reach them?

First of all, we know that there's a lot

less water in the river than the Single Authority claims there is.

Second of all, in the absence of the Narmada Sagar Dam, the irrigation benefits of the Sardar Sarovar drop by a further 17-30 per cent.

Third of all, the irrigation efficiency of the Wonder Canal (the actual amount of water delivered by the system) has been arbitrarily fixed at 60 per cent. The highest irrigation efficiency in India, taking into account system leaks and surface evaporation, is 35 per cent. This means it's likely that only half of the command area will be irrigated. Which half? The first half.

Fourth, to get to Kutch and Saurashtra, the Wonder Canal has to negotiate its way past the 10 sugar mills, the golf-courses, the five-star hotels, the water parks and the cash-crop growing, politically powerful, Patel-rich districts of Baroda, Ahmedabad, Kheda, Gandhinagar and Mehsana. (Already, in complete contravention of its own directives, the Single Authority has allotted the city of Baroda a sizeable quantity of water. When Baroda gets, can Ahmedabad be left behind? The political clout of powerful urban centres in Gujarat will ensure they get their share.)

Fifth, even in the (one hundred per cent) unlikely event that water gets there, it has to be piped and distributed to those 8,000 waiting villages.

It's worth knowing that of the one billion people in the world who have no access to safe drinking water, 855 million live in rural areas. This is because the cost of installing an energy-intensive network of thousands of kilometres of pipelines, aqueducts, pumps and treatment plants that are needed to provide drinking water to scattered rural populations is prohibitive. Nobody builds Big Dams to provide drinking water to rural people. Nobody can afford to.

When the Morse Committee first arrived in Gujarat they were impressed by the Gujarat government's commitment to taking drinking water to such distant, rural outposts. They asked to see the detailed drinking water plans.

There weren't any. (There still aren't any.)

They asked if any costs had been worked out. "A few thousand crores," was the breezy answer. A billion dollars is an expert's calculated guess. It's not included as part of the project cost. So

where is the money going to come from?

Never mind. Jus' askin'.

It's interesting that the Farakka Barrage that diverts water from the Ganga to Calcutta Port has reduced the drinking water availability for 40 million people who live downstream in Bangladesh.

At times there's something so precise

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and mathematically chilling about nationalism.

Build a dam to take water away from 40 million people. Build a dam to pretend to bring water to 40 million people.

Who are these gods that govern us? Is there no limit to their powers?

The last person I met in the valley

was Bhaji Bhai. He is a Tadvi tribal from Undava, one of the first villages where the government began to acquire land for the Wonder Canal and its 75,000 km network. Bhaji Bhai lost 17 of his 19 acres to the Wonder Canal. It crashes through his land, 700 feet wide including its walkways and steep, sloping embankments, like a velodrome for giant bicyclists.

The Canal network affects more than 200,000 families. People have lost wells and trees, people have had their houses separated from their farms by the canal, forcing them to walk two or three kms to the nearest bridge and then two or three kms back along the other side. About 23,000 families, let's say 100,000 people, will be, like Bhaji Bhai, seriously affected. They don't count as 'Project-affected' and are not entitled to rehabilitation.

Like his neighbours in Kevadia Colony, Bhaji Bhai became a pauper overnight.

Bhaji Bhai and his people, forced to smile for photographs on government calendars. Bhaji Bhai and his people, denied the grace of rage. Bhaji Bhai and his people, squashed like bugs by this country they're supposed to call their own.

It was late evening when I arrived at his house. We sat down on the floor and drank over-sweet tea in the dying light. As he spoke, a memory stirred in me, a sense of *deja vu*. I couldn't imagine why. I knew I hadn't met him before. Then I realised what it was. I didn't recognise him, but I remembered his story. I'd seen him in an old documentary film, shot more than 10 years ago, in the valley. He was frail now, his beard softened with age. But his story hadn't aged. It was still young and full of passion. It broke my heart, the patience with which he told it. I could tell he had told it over and over and over again, hoping, praying, that one day, one of the strangers passing through Undava would turn out to be Good Luck. Or God.

Bhaji Bhai, Bhaji Bhai, when will you get angry? When will you stop waiting? When will you say 'That's enough!' and reach for your weapons, whatever they may be? When will you show us the whole of your resonant, terrifying, invincible strength? When will you break the faith? Will you break the faith? Or will you let it break you?

To be continued