

Laila-tul-Miraj

The momentous meeting with Lord Creator

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

WHAT do we mean by the term "Laila-tul-Miraj"? "Lail" means night and "Miraj" means journey, so by the term "Laila-tul-Miraj" we mean journey by night. It relates to an unusual, wonderful and matchless journey by night performed by our holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (peace be upon him) to seven heavens through the outer space right up to the august presence of Allah Rabbul Alameen after crossing 70,000 veils of His "Noor" (Light). As desired by Almighty Allah the journey took place on the 27th night of the lunar month of Rajab, seven gears after the holy Prophet's attainment of prophethood. In this connection we may refer to Ayat one of Sura Bani Israel (Children of Israel) of the Holy Quran where Allah Gafur-ar-Rahim says:

"Glory to (God) Who did take His Servant for
Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the
Farthest Mosque whose precincts We did bless,
in order that We might show him some of Our
Signs: For He is the One Who

heareth and seeth (all things)."
The Muslims all over the world celebrate this sacred night every year with due solemnity because the journey performed on this night is the greatest and most magnificent ever performed by a man and that great man is our holy Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (pbuh). We may now see how the momentous journey commenced. The holy Prophet's (pbuh) Ascension right from the precinct of the holy Ka'ba of Mecca to Masjid-ul Aqsa of Jerusalem and then his onward matchless journey at a tremendous speed across the seven heavens till he reached a place known as Sidratul Muntaha is unique. This is the place beyond which no one has ever proceeded except our holy Prophet (pbuh) for it is the line of demarcation between Allah's creation and the world or area of His own Noor consisting of 70,000 veils. And till he reached Sidratul Muntaha Archangel Jibrail AS was his guide. From Sidratul Muntaha the holy Prophet (pbuh) was required to proceed alone in a special kind of vehicle called "Raf Raf" for crossing the said 70,000 veils of Almighty Allah's "Noor"

(Light) without the aid of Hazrat Jibrail AS and ultimately, as desired by Allah Rabbul Alameen, the holy Prophet (pbuh) was taken to His august presence for a fruitful dialogue with Him. After the dialogue the holy Prophet (pbuh) availed this unique opportunity to have a look of some of the most wonderful Signs (including the abodes of the virtuous and the abodes of the damned) of Almighty Allah.

A question may, however, arise was this magnificent Ascension of our holy Prophet (pbuh) was a miraculous bodily journey or was it a spiritual one. Majority of our revered commentators, as stated by a commentator of international repute Allama Abdullah Yusuf Ali, take this journey of our holy Prophet (pbuh) literally. According to the same commentator we also learn that Spaniard Miguel Asin, Arabic Professor in the University of Madrid has shown that this Miraj had a great influence on the mediaeval literature of Europe and especially on the great Italian poem the Divine Comedy (Drama of Dante) which towers like a landmark in medieval European literature.

After the Momentous Meeting was over and when the holy

Prophet (pbuh) was bidding adieu to Lord Creator for returning to this mundane world, what was the valuable gift he received from Bounteous Allah for him and also for the whole Muslim Ummah? The most valuable gift was the 'Salat' or "Namaz" offering of which to Almighty Allah five times a day is obligatory for every eligible Muslim. I may remind that according to Quranic Ayat "Salah" or "Namaz" it refrains a man from doing any evil deed.

We are not aware how far the galaxy or the milky way is from this planet of ours. The long distance between the holy Ka'ba and Sidratul Muntaha is also not known to us, nor do we know the distance between one to another of 70 thousand veils of Almighty Allah's Noor. What however overwhelms us is that our holy Prophet (pbuh) had, by the grace of Benign Allah, the unique power, honour and privilege to pass through all these stages on the 27th night of the lunar month of Rajab. Let us celebrate this night with due solemnity and pray to Allah Rabbul Alameen for showering His blessings and peace on our holy Prophet (pbuh) and his companions.

The anguish of being a Muslim American

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED
writes from Princeton

IT is difficult being an American Muslim these days. In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon, Islam itself has been the subject of denunciations. A closer look at the relevant verses of the holy Quran will allay American apprehensions.

The holy Quran emphasizes over and over again the preciousness of human life. It states that if a person kills one human being, it is as though he has killed the whole of humanity. And that if he saves one human life, it is as though he has saved the whole of humanity.

All life is sacred in Islam, even animal life. That is why, when Muslims sacrifice an animal, they are required to do so in by invoking the name of God over it, thus acknowledging that only God can give life, and only God can take life away.

The sanctity of life extends to one's own life as well. Suicide is forbidden in Islam, as it is in all other major religions. The destruction of life and property that took place at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11 were all the results of suicide missions. By definition, those were anti-Islamic acts. The fact that the perpetrators did not know their victims, nor cared who they were, for there were Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs among those who worked and died in the World

Trade Center, takes the crime beyond any organized religion into the realm of the evil.

Some people are asking: "what is in the holy Quran that makes these people do these things?" I have read the holy Quran several times, and I can assure everyone that there is nothing in it that justifies such horrendous crimes. What these terrorists have perpetrated has nothing to do with Islam. It has nothing to do with God. It has everything to do with the devil.

Like the rest of America, and

community, feel that perhaps some in our community secretly support such horrendous acts and are somehow responsible for it, and would like to lash out against us. It hurts because it detracts from our humanity. How can we not grieve when our Christian and Jewish neighbours are grieving? After all, the holy Quran teaches us to respect the Jews and Christians as the People of the Book, who had also received God's revelations. There is a verse in the holy Quran that specifies our binding duties to

brought to justice, for Islam allows retribution. The victims have three choices in Islam: they can forgive, ask for compensation or ask for retribution.

The holy Quran also states that if someone is present where evil is being hatched, he or she should either try to stop it, failing which he or she should walk away. Even if the person is an unwilling listener to an evil plot, he or she becomes a part of the plot. America's Muslim community, therefore, wholeheartedly supports President George Bush's assertion that he will make no distinction between terrorists and those who harbour them.

Unfortunately, America's Muslim community cannot stop terrorists from committing crimes in the name of Islam, neither can anyone stop the fringe elements in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism or Sikhism from doing the same by invoking the good names of those religions. I would like to make one request of my fellow Americans. Please try and make a distinction between the religion of Islam, which really preaches peace and which has over one billion peaceful followers, and the criminal fringe elements who wage war in Islam's name.

After the terrorist acts, I met some Muslim-American boys and girls. I told them that under the circumstances, they should be careful. They replied: "Why? "We haven't done anything!"

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LETTER FROM AMERICA

Please try and make a distinction between the religion of Islam, which really preaches peace and which has over one billion peaceful followers, and the criminal fringe elements

indeed the rest of the civilized world, I am outraged and angry at the atrocities that were committed against innocent Americans. I grieve for the victims and their families. I suffer from another dimension of pain of which most Americans are not aware. At a time like this, when all the evidence point towards someone claiming to belong to my faith (Osama bin Laden) committing these crimes, my community is under the gun. A few Americans, who do not know my

neighbours, regardless of their religion.

In our outrage and anger, my community and I feel exactly the same way the rest of America feels. Like other Americans, I have lost friends, Muslims and non-Muslims, who worked at the World Trade Center. I have not had the courage to call the homes of some of those acquaintances to find out how they are or if they even survived. Like other Americans, I want the perpetrators of this horrendous crime

WHITE CANE SAFETY DAY

Caring for the blind

SADAF NOORI CHOWDHURY

THROUGHOUT history, significant number of people have overcome the challenges of being blind or visually impaired and through their fortitude and strength of character, contributed greatly to prosperity of the nation as a whole. Like every year, almost every country worldwide is observing the White Cane Safety Day on 15th of October 2001 and so is Bangladesh. National Forum of Organisation Working with the Disabled (NFOWD), a well recognised NGO networking in the sector of disability and development and also committed to promote the rights and equality of people with disabilities in the country, jointly with the Ministry of Social Welfare, Department of Social Services, National Foundation for the Development of the Disabled People (NFDDP) have organised different programmes to observe this special day.

White Cane Safety Day is celebrated to remind all of us about the abilities, rights and responsibilities of the blind. The concept of this day was basically originated in Colombo in the year 1969. Three hundred visually impaired people from sixty-nine countries gathered in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, to share the scope of the socio economic development, education, training and maintaining independent mobility in every sphere of life for visually impaired people. Among many proposals, it was decided in Colombo meeting that every year, countries all around the world will observe this day as White Cane Safety Day to honour many achievements of the citizens of the world who are blind or visually impaired and recognize the white cane's significance in advancing their independence.

Disability, whatever the form it has, is not a cause although an effect. Strong efforts are needed to find solution to this effect rather than

spending much time on identifying various causes of the disability. Sometimes it is both a cause and consequences of ignorance, which can be prevented in right time. Of the total population of the country, it is estimated that 10 per cent is disabled of which one per cent visually impaired. According to surveys conducted by Helen Keller International, Nutritional Blindness Study and the Institute of Public Health Nutrition, approximately 30,000 children go blind every year due to the deficiency of Vitamin A. According to the United Nations, one person in 20 has a disability. More than three out of four of these live in developing country. Recent World Bank estimates suggest they may account for as many as one in five of the world's poorest. Interestingly, a large proportion of disability is preventable. Achieving the development targets for economic, social, and human development will undoubtedly reduce the levels of disability in many poor countries.

The white cane is both a simple tool and a powerful as well as an indispensable symbol which gives greater freedom and mobility to those people who are blind or visually impaired. It gives them a sense of their surroundings and allows them to travel safely whether crossing the street or crossing the country by using the white cane in appropriate manner. It also represents a symbol of independence that has allowed countless blind and visually impaired people to participate and contribute in efforts of the greater multitude. For those who are sighted, the white cane shows that blind or visually impaired people have the ability, the desire, and the right to participate in every aspect of our national life. It is also a reminder that whether as pedestrians or drivers, we should respond with care and courtesy to people using white cane and for all of us, the white cane symbolises the independence of every citizen. We also consider this symbol to increase community

awareness and educate the public about the gifts and abilities of people with disabilities.

Unfortunately, like many developed country, Bangladesh has not yet incorporated the topic of safety for users of white cane into traffic laws. Many countries by conceiving this notion into traffic laws are helping them to open doors of opportunity for many blind and visually impaired people. Basically when someone drives he needs to be aware that there are pedestrians out there who might not be able to see others because of blindness or severe visual impairment and so that he takes the necessary precautions to ensure their safety. In our country, there is no specified or established law by the authority on white cane safety, so that there must be certain awareness among people about this white cane, what it symbolises for. Therefore, like in many other countries, it is necessary and extremely important in a country to set a law to stop any vehicles at 10 feet from a pedestrian carrying a white cane. In this context, drivers should also be aware that the law requires that blind pedestrians carrying white cane shall have the right-of-way. With proper training, people using the white cane can enjoy greater mobility and safety by determining the locations of curbs, steps, uneven pavement, and other physical obstacles in their path. White cane provides them the freedom to travel independently to their schools, offices, workplaces, amusement centres and to participate fully in community life.

White cane is a lucid tool but it also reminds us that the barriers against people with disabilities are discriminatory attitudes and practices that our society has too often placed in their way. As we observe white cane safety day, we affirm our commitment to building a society where we embrace the talents, energy, and contributions of every individual. Last year, from our

country, 31 disabled people attended the 10th Special Olympic Summer Games, which was held in North Carolina, USA, and 23 of them had brought gold medal for the country which is a record in the history of Bangladesh. As physically handicapped ever to qualify for and compete in such sorts of event, they set an extraordinary precedence and proved to millions of people across the globe that disability should not be a limitation to achievement or a barrier to success.

This is very important to be aware of and utilise the employment skills of blind citizens by recognising their worth as individuals and their productive capacities as employees. In this circumstance, public awareness and proper education are prerequisites. Prospective employers, can look forward to a continued expansion of employment opportunities for and greater acceptance of blind persons in the competitive job market. On the other hand, government with the help of other organizations pursue a comprehensive strategy to enable people with all types of disabilities to obtain and sustain competitive employment. Men and women with disabilities have much to offer, and their energy, creativity and hard work can greatly strengthen our nation and our economy. As we observe White Cane Safety Day and acknowledge the importance of the white cane as an instrument of personal freedom, let us reaffirm our determination to ensure equal opportunity for people who are blind and visually impaired. The purpose of white cane safety day is to inform the public and raise awareness about the users of the white cane.

Bangladesh needs to take immediate steps towards ensuring the safety and rights of the blind and visually impaired persons.

Sadaf Noori Chowdhury is Coordinator of NFOWD

We need reassurance!

ESAM SOHAIL writes from Kansas, USA

IT is not very often that an expatriate Bangladeshi can stand tall amongst fellow men and be counted amongst those who are a set apart. But when you can proudly point out that you come from the fifth biggest democracy in the world which has just had another democratic change of regime, it gives you an inherent sense of belonging to an elite global community. I would urge our politicians, journalists, and commentators not to risk that hard-earned pride by irresponsible words or deeds.

The elections are over and Bangladesh won. A whole phalanx of local and foreign observers has confirmed it. The victory or defeat of political parties is marginal when held in comparison to the triumph of our democracy. In that regard, the incoming Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leadership has done a commendable thing by resolutely asking law-enforcers to crackdown on those whose misguided triumphalism has resulted in loss of life and property. If the continuing reports of lawlessness are correct, however, then Begum Khaleda Zia and her associates need to take a more persistent and forceful stand against those law-breakers who seek protection under the victorious nationalist banner. Never mind who did what in the past, the wholesale occupation of dormitories, transportation nodes, and parking lots cannot and should not be tolerated. The last time that happened, those responsible got wiped out in national elections, as BNP surely recalls. A lion's share of responsibility for generating goodwill rests squarely with the victors.

In addition to reaching out to the vanquished and disciplining unruly

partymen, the BNP leadership has to assuage the fears of many of us secular nationalists who shudder at the thought of having any influence of religious fanaticism in the running of our Republic. While some such fears, articulated out of ill-motives, are outlandish (Talebanization of Bangladesh!), others are quite genuine. There is a sincere apprehension in certain patriotic circles about the wisdom of including those in government whose political philosophy is at variance with our republican Constitution's parliamentary system where sovereignty rests with the people. Women and religious minorities too need to be reassured that the sermonising zeal of certain minor elements of the ruling alliance will not tread on the inherent rights of all citizens to enjoy equal protections and freedoms under the law.

But the responsibility of reassuring a post-election Bangladesh is not the victors' alone. As the largest single recipient of votes, the Opposition Awami League's role is complementary to that of the BNP in making sure that the business of the Republic goes on. It is disturbing to note the irresponsible statements of certain AL leaders who have used the term 'Taleban' and 'fundamentalist' to describe the incoming administration. While such anger is understandable, in these unsettling times, those epithets can be extremely damaging to the interests of Bangladesh. And the interests of Bangladesh override the combined interests of all the parties put together several times over! The desire on part of the AL leadership and its allies to question the integrity of the caretaker government and law enforcers is quite disturbing and uncalled for. Let us not forget that most members of the caretaker administration were agreed to by the outgoing regime of Sheikh

Hasina. Similarly, the chiefs of all three services, Bangladesh Rifles, police, Ansar, National Security Intelligence etc were appointed by the previous Awami League administration. Instead of looking back as sore losers, the Awami League should join with all responsible political elements to assure the

country's business community and her overseas partners that Bangladesh will be a stable and secure place to live, invest, and prosper.

Frankly, we do not have much of an alternative.

Democracy, politics and people

SYED SAIFUDDIN HOSSAIN

GOVERNMENT of the people, for the people and by the people", this is the definition of democracy that all of us have learnt and digested over the years. We know, it is the best form of politics where we, the people, are given the supreme authority to elect our leaders by exercising our right of voting. But as far as politics in our country is concerned, a bitter fact is that we have seen little unanimity among political parties regarding people's will.

As human beings, our fundamental right and desire is to live a peaceful life -- free from vandalism, terrorism, corruption, poverty and unemployment. In order to fulfil that dream, we elect our government and hope it will justify our choice through accountability, transparency and proper execution of the power vested thereupon. Effective participation of both the government and opposition parties is a precondition to give democracy its institutional shape.

There is hardly anyone who can defy the power of patriotism and nationalism that the people of this land bear in their hearts. The 'Language Movement of 1952', the 'Mass Uprising of 1969' and finally the glorious 'Liberation War of 1971' these are only some of the dazzling historic events that make us proud and further strengthen our nationalism. We have also witnessed the combined efforts and success of all the democratic parties and the people of Bangladesh in uprooting autocracy in 1991. So we love democracy and nationalism from the bottom of our hearts. But why is

it that our 'democratic nationalism' is in a high tide only when we are encountered by some external or anti-democratic forces? Why can't we get our acts together to make democracy itself meaningful at a time when we are living in a democratic society? Why is it that to achieve our political goals, we don't even hesitate to divide the nation into so called 'Pro-Liberation' and 'Anti-Liberation' forces?

Just like any other election, the parliamentary election of October 1, 2001, has projected the opinion of the people of Bangladesh in favour of those they think are better for them. This reality is common to every election in a democratic country. Whenever the ruling party fails to fulfil the desire of the countrymen, it is bound to fall. But the prevailing political scenario is somewhat in contrast to the democratic reality. A major reshaping of our political culture is the foremost demand of the hour.

Ever since 1971, we have seen enough political unrest and hostility among and between the political parties. Everybody seems to fail to realize that losing an election does not bring an end to the existence of a certain political party. Such unwanted behaviour has had and is still having its implications on the development of the state as well as the life of the peace-loving people of the country. At this moment, we, the people of this land, request the political parties to forget all their ideological differences and work together to achieve the ultimate goal of economic and social justice.

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