

Lailatul Barat

Its far-reaching significance

SHAB-E-BARAT holds a far deeper meaning to our life than the eclat one sees manifest on the day in savouring *halwa* and indulging in fireworks. It is called Lailatul Barat, 'Laila' meaning night and 'Barat' salvation, so that put together it's the night of salvation that we prepare to observe from sundown today, the supplication before Allah going well into the night. The devotees will experience a profound sense of communion with *Rabbul Alamin* as they seek salvation from many ills that surround them. Just as the salvation of the departed souls is prayed for, so also is the guidance sought from the Almighty to steer the living ones clear of the demons that ensnare them.

Knowledgeable devotees apart, Shab-e-Barat has a very significant appeal to common Muslims. They look upon it as a night symbolically determining their destiny for another year, albeit not in any fatalistic sense of the term, because in Islam it is the deeds of men and women and not any idle thoughts that go to shape their fate -- make them into arbiters of their own destiny.

There is sense of inventory-taking about the observance of the occasion in terms of the moral ammunition we have or don't have, which to our mind, has the best potential for revitalising individual and community lives.

Religion has to emerge as a moral force sweeping aside everything that is hurtful to humanity, anachronistic to its pristine values. It must be featured by a robust sense of equality, liberty, fraternity and brotherhood not just within the perimeter of a single Faith but encompassing followers of other religions as well.

In fact under Islam in its ideal form, the question of religious persecution doesn't arise. It's not a faith which denies the religious right of others. We should remind ourselves that a true believer lets others practice their faith freely and openly. The finest Muslim is he who not only practices his own faith but ensures the right to practice of others. This is a message meant for all Muslims everywhere including in our own land.

Let our prayers tonight be for a better Bangladesh born of an end to social discrimination and poverty that are out of character with welfare precepts of Islam.

Control the Tadbir Bahini at Topkhana

Let's have a special time and place for party leaders to meet followers

ONE has heard of the corridors of power but few realise that people have to cross the front yard to reach the corridors. The palace where power resides not only has corridors but is well guarded as well. One has to negotiate the external space before gaining entry inside. Power has hierarchies not only of dispensation but access too.

Which is why one shouldn't be surprised to see the rush of civilians jostling at the Secretariat Gate to get in to lobby. Since all who wish to be inside can't get in, the crowd of aspiring and hopefuls swell at the Gate. In ancient times the gates of the castle were lowered and then pulled up at dusk to facilitate entry of those seeking mercies of the Crown. One finds it difficult to deny that the analogy of power has changed little when castles and kings ruled the land. But new facilitation systems must be installed.

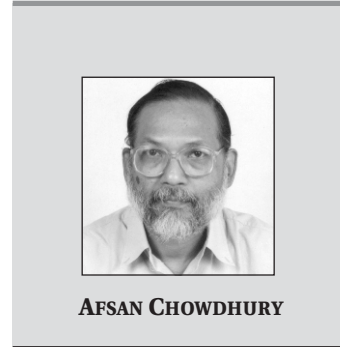
The Secretariat at Topkhana is where the State is located and it's difficult to imagine how the favour seeking crowds will ever disappear. Bangladesh is ruled from Topkhana and the hordes - the helpless, desperate or the opportunist - huddle at the right place because they know that this place is the focal point of the public policy making.

However, a large crowd does provide an unseemly sight and not all can gain access inside. Moreover, this centralizing of power is also not in consonance with the real needs of local level power, resource and law management. It can't be located in Dhaka only. It has to be evenly distributed if only to make the State better spread physically.

The nature of processing political and administrative favours must be rationalised for two urgent reasons. Very few can gain entry inside and that limits the opportunity to seek redress of grievances. This has to be widened. The other is to organize a more systematic way of ensuring this process. It's in the interest of all to therefore have alternate arrangements where the public representatives can listen to the public's needs and react accordingly. Running the State will hamper if the administrators work in such crowded conditions full of outsiders.

The Government will have achieved much if the space for inter-action is streamlined and that can happen in a free, unencumbered and equitable space where all can place their demands and hope to be at least heard.

How much money does an election need?



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

WE have just had a highly participated election. There were hundreds of candidates, thousands of campaigners and millions of voters. Now we have a new government and a new parliament. It's all a lot of fun. How much did this fun cost?

Let's try to estimate what it cost the candidates. We of course don't know what exactly it cost the civilians who stood in elections but let's try a guessing game. Before we go further let's have a break.

Soon after the June election of 1996, I visited a friend's residence who had just won a seat in the parliament. The MP was in a rush to meet foreign dignitaries so I sat with his mother, an old family friend and discussed life as we sipped *daber pani*.

"I really don't know what to do. This election cost the family 50 lakhs. We can hardly afford that kind of money. We had to sell our Dhaka land. He doesn't listen to me. Could you talk to him?" Elections, even victories bring many problems to people including mothers without an unlimited income.

Now back to the present. I have learnt from Election Commission sources that the Government spent 25 crores in 1991, 37 crores in February 1996 and 30 crores in June 1996 and this year the calculation

is still on but it will certainly be above 70 crores. That means since 1996, the cost has literally doubled. There is no reason to believe that the election expenses for the candidates have not doubled as well.

During this election there were 1935 candidates, give or take a few. How much did they spend? It would be a question that will have no final or definite answers. I have asked at least fifty people - candidates, campaign managers, election agents, journalists, and beneficiaries like press owners etc., and have some estimates, some confessions. Let me share them.

Almost all say that the expenditure figure for major party candidates would be close to 1 crore. How many major party candidates are there? According to them there are 3 per constituency. That is AL, BNP, JP+ another. The rest are not serious candidates or with high spending power but they certainly spend as much as 5 lakhs. But big party candidates spend millions. These are basic facts with which all agree. So how much do each spend?

This becomes a gray area of argument but no one has quoted less than 50 lakhs per big candidate and most went up to 1 crore. To be on the safe side, let's take 75 lakh per candidate, a middle point. Now there are 300 constituencies, 3

major candidates and the figure is 75 lakhs. So it becomes 75 X 300 X 3 = 675 crores. I have asked many people and most agree that this would be a reasonable, close to an accurate figure. In fact on the right side of caution. Mind you this is only for the top candidates. Officially the three top candidates, like all candidates were allowed a spending ceiling of 5 lakhs per constituency. That means 5 X 3 X 300 = 45 crores. If we accept these figures, then we could be saying that the top party candidates have spent 675 crores instead of the allowed 45 crores or 630 crores more. That is 15 times more than the allowed ceiling. Everyone I talked to thinks I was conservative in my estimate. It's an awesome figure.

Now another break before we go into the next part

I visited a candidate's home turf during the campaigning. By the way, he has been elected in this election. He showed me all that he has done in the last five years even as an opposition MP. Finely crafted roads led into the deep bellies of villages. We move in his Pajero with its air-conditioned interior. Soon we reach his ancestral home now part of his sprawling 'constituency home'. Generators whirred as we stepped into an air-conditioned world of luxuries that challenges

what he has in Dhaka. I note some fine paintings on the wall. Original Zainuls, Jamini Rays, Quamrul, an odd Sultan, Indian masters like Ganesh Pyne, Jatin Das, etc.

"They are safer here. And I can appreciate them with my friends without worry." Dogs and men guard his home.

In the two decades that I know him, he is not only richer than I think, he is richer than I can think. When I called to ask him about how much he had spent, he laughed derisively. "Why should I tell you? I tell him he has a point.

Back to the main programme again

How much did the 1935 candidates spend? I have no idea but let's see if we can estimate a figure. And a very legal one too that is what is allowed to be spent. It's 1935 X 5 = 9675 lakhs or nearly 100 crores. People say that is not even an estimate but a silly official calculation. I ask if people will admit -- the big spenders -- if they had spent anything more than 5 lakhs. They giggle. I ask the Election Commission.

According to the newly passed law, anyone spending more than 5 lakhs from any means and failing to inform would be liable to be jailed for a minimum of 2 years and a max of 7 years. I am informed that no returns have ever shown figures beyond the sanctioned limit.

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART

I understand the facts but not the implications. Does it mean that the legislature has become the most exclusive domain of the rich? That only the wealthy can aspire to legislate? That the rich alone have the right to govern and the poor only the right to be ruled? In a way, the Parliament is outside the reach of those who are not rich so it's like an exclusive club, more exclusive than the legendary Dhaka Club is where pukka attire is essential for entry. Has it become a Bangladesh Club?

So although most if not almost everyone believes that laws on election spending have been violated nothing will happen because there is no way of knowing.

Does it mean that our MPs will begin their legislative life by turning in a lie? And what can we expect from MPs who start their legislative life with falsehood? Of course all this is conjecture but suppose it isn't?

A candidate, exhausted by his defeat has time for reflection. "This 5 lakhs ceiling is absurd. We spent more money every time we compete. This is a systemic flaw. No elections can be held with so little money. This is a 50 lakh game to get a nomination and another crore to contest. This is the minimum. The Election Commission knows it but will not raise the ceiling forcing people to make false declarations. It's not our fault but their fault."

I agree that this isn't their fault but I am slightly puzzled. Surely, no one in Bangladesh will ever cough up 100 crores for anything like curing the TB problem or tackling malnutrition. If we could mobilize that kind of resources for the social sector that would be a wonder. Apart from the 900 'serious' there is the other 1000 who didn't have a ghost of a chance but they do preferred to spend it on still born campaigns than helping those they promise to serve. Contest even if

that's hopeless but don't share your wealth. We would much rather spend it on an election in which only 300 will win.

We are attracted by the promised grandeur of being a legislator but not the real need of social change. So many activities never happen or closed down because of fund shortage but come election time, the funds flow like an unruly river.

What does it all up to?

An old part veteran who has never left the party he supported when he began street politics in 1969 tells me that "elections are for the rich, for the powerful, for those who can manage and marshal. It's not a game for you or me to play with. You are not rich nor am I. So give vote. When you are rich you take votes. *Bujchen boss?*"

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If the figures stated by all are correct we have seen a silent revolution. In this revolution carried through ballots and participated by the less privileged, the entire law making and ruling process has been taken over by the rich. If they decide to take care of the poor, fine but if they wish to take care of the fellow rich, can we blame them?

So to whom does the State belong?

The author is a Senior Assistant Editor of The Daily Star. Starting this week, his column will appear every week.

The Awami League debacle

TARIQ ALI

AS we stare in disbelief at the crop of empty seats on the Awami side of the parliament, we must take stock of why it happened. It is not enough to wave it off impatiently with a simplistic statement that this was the people's verdict. It most certainly was; but there must have been more to it than just that. All of us who are in one or more ways sympathetic to the party in whose body and soul was embellished the ideals of the war that gave the people of this country a voice in the *iqat-sabha* need to ask ourselves the uneasy question of how we could close our eyes over the last five years to the AL's suicidal policies, especially in those two or three areas which feature so compellingly in setting perceptions of the population as to whether a government has or has not been successful.

Amongst many other things, of which the compilation of two sets of voters lists one real and the other meant for the Awami Leaguers - was certainly spawned under the able care of the *sarker*, was it an overdose of complacency at the Awami election booths where we have reports of agents ambling in at 10 O'clock (repetition of what happened in the Mirpur booths in 1991). Or had the AL become a victim of conspirators from within, where polling agents were quietly seen to walk away from their booths soon after lunch? Can the party defend the myth of a dedicated *kormi-bahini* who we now know were nothing more than indiscriminately inducted street-recruits, dedicated only to fattening their own coffers. They could not care two hoots about party objectives or give a damn about party discipline. It is no surprise therefore, that the *dalers* of three days ago had become *leaguers* yesterday only to metamorphosed into *dalers* again today.

One could certainly argue that the situation in the BNP is no differ-

ent. But the AL is supposed to be a party with half a century of history of fighting for party ideals. Sadly, the only history that seemed to matter to our ministers (there were only the ministers, the party was non-functional) in the past five years was how they could scale the pinnacles of perfection in continuing the art that their Ershadian predecessors had pioneered. If the party would show enough gumption to create a single instance of punishment for this loot, (despite many shortcomings there are such examples in India) the election results may have been less disastrous. In the absence of this check and balance by the party, the leaders became so intoxicated with greed and loot that they went beyond caring whether it won or lost and are now busy trying to hoard the booty they have accumulated. Without advocating the indiscriminate spending of money for election purposes, we may point out that many of these hoarder-candidates did nothing to match the money that the BNP was spreading. It is also no surprise that there is a move by the same people to stymie whatever introspective searches that the party may have decided to initiate into this disastrous failure.

Introspective searches should also be made as to what caused the party to recant from the promise it had made to the public for holding the elections in June. It is no secret that BNP was totally unprepared for the elections in June and the AL would have won hands down if elections were held then.

The way its information moghuls have handled the media also needs to be scrutinised deeply. I am sure that it has dawned on the AL policy-makers today that the information ministry needed to be handled... philosophically, perhaps is the right word and its battering down wave after wave of what would have been regarded as history if correctly projected, is denigrated today as crudity and propaganda and only deepened the alienation of the general public.

The Awami Leaguers may also want to evaluate whether the policy of trying to appease Muslim sentiments needed to take the form of donning clown-like *toopees* (the likes of which, no Bengali ever saw in his *saatjanme*) or *patrys* on their heads and gave them any mileage at all. All that hip gyrating (to borrow from Arundhati Roy) in front of the Golamwallahs, did nothing alas, to even remotely shake them off their resolve to one day annihilate their mortal enemy in the AL. The party's overzealous attempts to Islamicise its image, like the mindless spending for madrassah education (a project where the two western lead financing institutions and our western friends have been co-sponsors, until *Anno Taliban*) did however, succeed in alienating that liberal section of the population which would have otherwise been drawn by its image of a modern, secular and democratic party.

If they continue the self-destructive policy of trying to steal Jamat's thunder by becoming more religious than the Jamatis themselves, they have another sad lesson ahead of them. It will irreversibly damage the support of another section of our population that has been so loyal to the AL, its Hindu vote-bank. Then again, it was profoundly unwise for the AL to think that it could fool all people all the time by brandishing in thin air the *Muktijuddho* and its

chetona sword. That there was a lack of sincerity in it did not go unnoticed with the 15 million first-time voters and should prompt us to do a bit of soul-searching. They should have realised that rhetoric alone without brick and mortar construction of the actual building will be unable to oppose the combined onslaught of the *Pakistanpasand* voters. Since the BNP had divided the country by going to bed with the Jamatis, the Awami League should also have rallied the pro-liberation forces with them - even if it meant giving them some rudimentary support. It should also have been sensitive to the fact that Taliban or not, western perceptions are rooted deep that the BNP is a more pliable, acceptable and sophisticated, if you will - band to serve their overall designs for the sub-continent. The BNP did not waste any time in making pre-election promises to whoever that matters, for the export of gas, a 'free' port, and the grant of transit facilities through its territory.

The party must also look inwards to assess whether it was the *Bibhishons* inside the household itself, who kept adding unreal or unreal breakthrough to the election canvas as the day neared, that lulled the party into suicidal slumber.

There is also another very important assessment to be made, and this for the future. The reports given by the security agencies, themselves trained and brainwashed in the theories of *Islam in khatra* that we remember so well from our Pakistani days, should perhaps have been taken with a grain of salt, the enticements provided by MiGs and frigates notwithstanding. The party should have also created a

reliable certainly not the Chhatro League variety - of intelligence gathering mechanism. If someone argues that objective intelligence gathering is not possible in Bangladesh, one needs only to look at BNP's mechanism. And we must face the cruel reality that the scatter-brain efforts of three computers and a fax machine at the Awami election office was absolutely no match against the professionalism and the corporate efficiency of *Hawa Mahal* *thukkuBhaban*. (By the way, from where did their consultant come?)

It must have been more than all that. We must find out how devastating must have been the role of *attyoti*, given a new dimension during these five years, in the minds of the party loyalists, who have breathed, slept and dreamt *nouka* and *Bangabandhu* through their long political careers. We must also ask ourselves whether it could also have been a gross misreading of the attitudes of the voters of today when the high command, in their singular pursuit of nominating candidates who would win by hook or crook, ended up nominating socially unacceptable candidates tainted with *shontrash*, and *kalo-taka*. It is true that the BNP did the same. But they had a five-year respite, during which their misdeeds had receded into fuzzy memories. The party will also be doing itself wrong if it blinks away from the corruption of its ministers. Blearily-voiced with gluttony, they devoured the income of fourteen generations within the time-span of one ministry. It was they who spear-headed (their psychopaths of course, were not far behind) the *jabar-dakhal* of land, *tilas*, lakes, rivers, forest not to mention of course,

Hindu land and property, (which is a divine right blessed unto anyone who is in power) the arms of their *dakhal* extending perhaps even to the Bay of Bengal. And who would dare not to partake of the sumptuous lays that the "bara" and "chota" hazaris of the day provided on the table. We must also not forget the contribution that the one Mukuli, two Dipus or a hundred rapists at the Universities made to our great feat of 61 seats. The nation will also be remiss if it forgets the advisers, with a penchant for "breaking into tears" or the fossilised press-whatevers who hardly met the press in five years or the arrogance of those personal secretaries weaving day and night an impenetrable *bijho* around the person who is supposed to have emerged from the people. And finally, the contribution of the prime minister herself, spinning a web around her and keeping herself isolated from those very persons that she had promised herself five years ago not to become isolated from.

It was all that and more. It was a party asphixated to deathans the stewardship of party workers. That much needed stewardship was nowhere to be found in its empty party offices but had been herded into the drawing rooms of the ministers. It was a party which had become a lumbering juggernaut, barely able to move under the weight of the *chachas* in the party. It was a party which had killed itself under the weight of the very government it was supposed to sustain. It had been reduced to a paper-tiger, a party which had 1050 members (including its co-organisations) in every Union on paper, but had failed to organise even one meeting for these members. It was this party absent from itself that spelt so devastatingly, its disaster for this time at least.

The author is a private businessman.

PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.



STAR PHOTO: AKM MOHSIN

A ravished river called Shitalakhya

River Shitalakhya is an old woman who has no one to protect in her later days. No longer a young water way, commercial outfits to trespass and take over to expose and ravish. A foreign owned cement factory has easily grabbed part of the river's homestead and setup its own oven to bake money spinning goods. The helpless river endures without hope or relief.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Another American opinion

The American people do not see this as a retaliatory war. We were attacked by people with the means and the will to attack again. How many times do we need to see people killed before we are justified in removing the threat?

Having been brought into this conflict, America knows it is in a tough war. No one is surprised that the war hasn't achieved resolution yet. It took a long time for the terrorists to build their networks. It will take a long time to dismantle them. It will take a long time to rebuild New York.

In the meantime, as "An American" notes, we will continue to provide aid to the world. The US foreign aid budget is almost as large as the entire UN budget. In the year before September 11, the largest supplier of aid to Afghanistan was the US (\$185 million). This number has gone up since. The US has given \$4.5 billion total to Bangladesh, with \$102 budgeted for 2002.

I would much rather see my tax dollars going to USAID than the

military or rebuilding New York. Unfortunately, the terrorists are robbing the world of some of that money by redirecting US interests. The terrorists would like to bring peoples of the world to the same level by bringing America down to their level.

The American people would like to bring people of the world to the same level by elevating the level of prosperity of others.

Matt
USA, on e-mail

To the "American"

I would like to respond to the letter "An American opinion" (October 30). The letter reeks of a stereotypical American perspective-- it is as simplistic and uneducated an opinion as one would expect from a small town American resident. Not that I am accusing the writer of coming from a small town in the backwaters of the United States.

Clearly he/she has missed the point of the protest against the aggression on Afghanistan.

To protest the bombing does not necessarily mean that the protester is doing so in support of Osama Bin

Laden and against the USA. To put it simply, America cannot buy her way into the good books of the people around the world. It is high time that American foreign policy reflected its humanitarian views.

America may have been helping the world, but America has not bought it out just yet.

My 'American' friend may have reasons to be proud of his/her country. But he should first read the history books carefully and then decide whether he/she could really be proud of what his/her country has stood for.

I am sorry to be the one to break it to him but America has not hurt its economy helping countries that it didn't have economic interests in.

At the root of all the hatred the writer has questioned is American arrogance and oversight.

Finally I would like to say to my 'American' friend, "My arguments may not make much sense to you, but then you probably voted for George Bush."

Sayed Talat Kamal
Dhaka

'An American opinion' (October 30) prompts me to respond. I say to that angry American: America has not, in reality, fed too many Bangladeshi children. It's a fallacy championed by self-serving American 'donor' and 'aid' agencies. They do not acknowledge, and hence, you won't learn, how our country serves as a source of fat(test)-cat salaries and unbelievable perks for incorrigibly arrogant and ungrateful American expatriates.

The 'extortionist' dollars our country earns from Bangladesh far outstrips any 'aid' dollars that come our way.

Far from selflessly helping the world, your country has ruthlessly exploited the world for its own ends. You ought to recognise that your much-vaunted economy is built on the backs of millions of diligent, smart immigrants.

Your cherished prosperity is as much the creation of non-white minority citizens as your lily-white majority. You have almost always used your 'wealth and strength' NOT for 'the good of the world' but for destructive, exploitative, ruinous endeavours.

America has hijacked the WTO, withheld its dues to the UN and used other dirty tricks to reduce the UN to no more than its back office; uses the IMF and World Bank to subvert and enslave international economies etc.

I don't need to mention, in detail, America's crimes against Iraqis and the Palestinians.

Your unjust war against innocent Afghans will only make your compatriots suffer more in the future and cannot give you the illusory 'security' that you all once enjoyed.

To tell you the truth, our media seems too preoccupied reporting on local events and issues to tell much about the truths about the war on Afghans (and fellow Muslims).

No one needs to necessarily consider Osama Bin Laden or the Taliban their heroes to realise that America's 'war on terror' is also, in many ways, a direct 'war on Muslims'. And as we all know from bitter experiences, there's nothing that Americans love more, than an unjust war, away from home.

Sajjad Husain,
Dhaka, on e-mail