

## The night of destiny

Time to enrich understanding of Islam

TO common Muslims, the *Lailatul Barat* is the night of destiny, a night when their fate for the next one year is determined. This is the night hundreds of thousands of devout Muslims across the country spend in prayers to get a profound sense of oneness with Allah as they seek freedom from all worldly vices and strength to stick to the path, as ordained by the Almighty in the Holy Qur'an. From dusk today to dawn tomorrow, they will pray for salvation of the departed souls and also for themselves. In the process, they will reinvestigate their understanding of Islam. And here lies the challenge for the Muslims in this country and in other parts of the world -- understanding the religion we follow and practise.

Muslims across the globe today face a crisis, which has been created by gross misunderstanding of Islam. The developments in Afghanistan, Iraq, Indonesia, the Philippines, the Middle East and elsewhere have led to a stereotyping of Islam into a terrorist mould by the western world. But Islam is about peace and peaceful cohabitation with people of other faiths. The terrorism the world has experienced over the last one year or so has no relation whatsoever with Islam. And this is the message the Muslims must send out in unequivocal terms to the rest of the world. Unfortunately, the Muslim ummah as a whole stands divided and is weakening from within. The challenge, therefore, is to distance ourselves from the vile elements who are disrupting global peace and stability in the name of Islam and let the rest of the world realise what the religion actually stands for, thereby dispelling whatever misgivings now prevail about it.

In a multi-religious country like Bangladesh, our destiny lies in our desire to live and let others live in peace and harmony. Let our prayers tonight be for a better future of all mankind.

## Alleged deaths in custody

The campaign needs to be kept above controversy

HERE were three deaths allegedly in army custody in as many days of their anti-criminal campaign named 'Operation Clean Heart' launched since last weekend. We thought this called for an early comment lest such incidents, widely perceived to be untoward but pre-eminently avoidable, recurred down the line through lack of timely precautionary measures on the part of the authorities. Anything that could smear a campaign which has been mainly well-received by the people needs to be scrupulously avoided.

We support the army's countrywide operation against the criminals, their godfathers, their arms caches, drug rings, and extortion networks as the last resort to get things back on rails. The stakes are high and we want the campaign to succeed.

We are ready to understand that the army's behaviour pattern and its methods can be and are perhaps different than those of the police. Even allowing for some leeway there -- and it is incidentally also noticeable that the three dead men were supposedly local ruling party elements -- one is at a loss to appreciate the air of hush-hush or the mystery that enveloped their sudden deaths for some time after they were taken into custody for interrogation. There have been allegations of physical abuse voiced by relatives of the deceased. One cannot also fail to see a pattern to all the unfortunate incidents: they being taken to hospital with 'chest pain' or something, relatives not getting to see them, or the 'delayed' hand-over of the dead bodies to their relatives after autopsy and other related formalities.

We are not being judgmental here but merely trying to say that such things can give a bad name to a campaign whose effectiveness the people don't want to see compromised by any distractions, far less untoward incidents. Catching criminals is about upholding the law and not to be in breach of it, something that the army, as the most disciplined force in the country, are trained to hold aloft.

Instructions must now have travelled from the top of the army to the bottom level by way of ensuring accountability and transparency in their operations by all possible means.

The public, the well-wishers of the army operation against a tiny minority of criminals have a right to know what's happening and with what results as far as the massive anti-crime campaign is concerned. For, if there is any communication gap, the rumour mills will start spinning stories and in no time the air will be rife with speculations, even perhaps misgivings. All this might militate against the good potential of the campaign and the image of the army.

Let's reiterate that we are supportive of the move but it must be kept above controversy. That is the sole precondition to its success.

## Shab-e-Barat

The night of salvation

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

THE moment we learn a date or see a date in a national daily for observance of the sacred night of salvation, that is, 'Shab-e-Barat' or 'Laila-tul-Barat' we at once recall that the holy month of Ramadan is also not far-off. Shab-e-Barat, it may be stated here, gives us the glad tidings of early arrival of the most important lunar month of the Islamic calendar -- the month of Ramadan in which the first 5 Ayats of Sura Ala (the Clot) of the Holy Qur'an were revealed by Almighty Allah to our dear holy Prophet (peace be upon him) in 610 AD through the Arch Angel Hazrat Jibril (A.S). At that time (the holy Prophet) was in the cave of Mount Hira not far-off from the city of Mecca. It may not be irrelevant to state here a few words about the meaning of the compound word 'Shab-e-Barat' or 'Laila-tul-Barat'. 'Shab' is a Persian and Urdu word, and 'Lail' is an Arabic word. Whereas 'the word 'Barat' means salvation. So, the term 'Shab-e-Barat' or 'Laila-tul-Barat' means 'Night of Salvation.' Although nothing specifically has been mentioned about the importance of

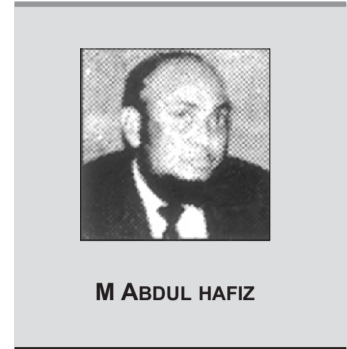
Shab-e-Barat in the Holy Qur'an, our holy Prophet (Pbuh) has, however, put great emphasis on the importance of the Night of Salvation (Shab-e-Barat) which Muslims all over the world celebrate on 15th night of the lunar month of Shaban.

Hazrat Ibn-e-Maza is one of the six great compilers of the holy Prophet's 'Hadis' and we may, therefore, refer to what he says about the holy Prophet's observations vis-a-vis importance of the Night of Salvation (Shab-e-Barat). Quoting Hazrat Ali (R.A) Hazrat Ibn-e-Maza gives the following observation made the holy Prophet (peace be upon him):

"Almighty Allah comes down (from his highest seat of authority) to the lowest heaven and immediately after sun-set asks, 'Is there any one from among the supplicants seeking forgiveness whom I can forgive? Is there any one who wants to get rid of the predicament he is in? Is there any one who wants to recover from the ailment he is suffering from?'"

Again, we also understand that the holy Prophet (Pbuh) advised his followers in the following manner, "During the night of the 15th Shaban offer your prayers to Almighty Allah and observe 'Siam' (fasting) during following day for Benign Allah

## The last imperium?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

NOTWITHSTANDING President Saddam Hussain's unexpected but very sensible decision late last month to unconditionally readmit the UN weapon inspectors with an accompanying sigh of relief from around the world the dread threat of a preemptive war on Iraq which Washington considers inevitable has hardly receded. Even as the vexed issues of principles fell away with Iraq's acceptance of the UN's will, new difficulties of practical nature has arisen with the spectre of conflict still looming. In the meantime no body exactly knows why Saddam, inspite of his country's long standing policy of defiance changed his mind. However, the speculations abound to suggest a variety of sectors for Saddam's volte face. Irrespective of whatever the reasons Saddam's decisions did provide a time for a period of cooling off the effrontery on his part. Yet, President George Bush, inheritor of his father's legacy was growing desperate by day to put the end-game against Iraq on the rails. George Bush has been ratcheting up the ante against Saddam Hussain since his rignmarole delivered at the UN General assembly on September 12. Plumb on the week-

end on September 19 he sent to the Congress his sternly drafted legislation seeking authorisation to go to war against Iraq. The following day the White House unveiled the Bush doctrine of 'preemptive strikes' against enemy deemed to be threatening the US interests. In spite of differences among the congressmen over granting Bush such sweeping mandate and their uneasiness over the president's untram-

resolution is suggestive of the use of force at any stage -- even before the inspectors returns to Baghdad and also before the fresh security council resolutions were agreed to. The tough wordings in the resolution was also seen as an attempt to step up pressure on the United Nations, although the resolution, when approved by the congress would give Bush the right to launch a military attack on the basis of exist-

taking what he described as 'first great struggle of a new century into Iraq'. In his speech to UNGA Mr Bush conveniently used the anniversary of September 11 attack as a launching pad for his campaign against Saddam Hussain buoyed by a national wave of grief and defiance from the memorial services across the US.

President Bush addressed the nation from New York's Ellis island

seek such a single toughly worded security council resolution that can authorise US 'military action if Iraq refuses a comprehensive and intrusive weapon inspection.

Mr Kofi Annan, the UN secretary general did not quite agree. The UN, it appears, may adopt a softer line. There is however little enthusiasm for endorsing an US invasion. In the meantime, Nelson Mandela added his voice to the international opposi-

which will now follow a "with us or against us" approach on all international security issues. It puts the real or imagined enemies of the United States and its allies on notice.

Any lack of support for core US policy will earn you charge of anti-Americanism and more difficult relation. The 29-page Bush doctrine outlines the US policy to impose of war on any entity deemed hostile to the US, preemptively. It is a sweeping charter of US intent and muscular projection in the 21<sup>st</sup> century thus proving the bears of many who have been presaging the rise of Pax Americana as the dominant force in time ahead. Bush is, no doubt, wedded to the concept of unbridled use of force to stamp out any opposition. That way Iraq will just be a test case -- invariably to be followed by Iran and ultimately China? Mr Bush has unmistakably taken the initial step towards making the US an empire on the model of Rome.

Although preemption has set up a squall of protest around the world accusing that it is beyond international law as well as unilateral setting a bad precedents for other counting -- but in an emerging imperium there is hardly a scope to debate the issue. As Mr Bush addressed the UN telling its 190 nations how things were going to be he spoke like an uncrowned emperor because the world's hyper power and its commander-in-chief were indeed in control as never before. The only discernible difference were the assembled nations all of whom might not have been troth less attendant of the senate of imperial time?

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

## PERSPECTIVES

**Any lack of support for core US policy will earn you charge of anti-Americanism and more difficult relation. The 29-page Bush doctrine outlines the US policy to impose of war on any entity deemed hostile to the US, preemptively... That way Iraq will just be a test case -- invariably to be followed by Iran and ultimately China? Mr Bush has unmistakably taken the initial step towards making the US an empire on the model of Rome.**

meled bellicosity the leaders of the houses have already come out in favour of arming Bush with powers sought by him.

President Bush has cleverly sequenced his salvo in the congress with precision of timing particularly with regards to Mid-term election which is just around the corner. Not interested in their political harikiri by annoying at this critical juncture the powerful. Swiss lobby which is baying for Iraqi blood the congressmen find few alternative to Bush Jingoism. The congress resolution, thus, dutifully said: "The President is authorised to use all means that he determines to be appropriate, including force, in order to enforce the UN security council resolution, defend the National security interest of the US against the threat posed by Iraq and restore the international peace and security in the region." The blunt language used in the

ing UN resolutions.

Armed with the formidable resolution that was drafted by the White House itself for the congress whose approval of it is seen only as a matter of formality could sufficiently reassure the president to implement his designs. Yet as the president of the world's sole superpower no could not possibly ignore the world body in the general assembly of which Bush already argued his case and sought a new security council resolution. However the president ceded some ground -- albeit symbolic to European and Arab critics of his unilateralist approach. As a result he also left slim opening for diplomacy to head off the catastrophe.

Infact, during his September 12 address to the UN General assembly Bush faced a decisive moment of his presidency as he attempted to persuade the UN to back him in

with the statue of liberty behind him. He inflamed the Americans by saying that the US and its ideas came under attack and were still in danger. The speech was, infact, designed to rally the US public to fresh sacrifice in the war on terror -- this time against Iraq and its non-obliging president. It is no longer a mystery that Mr Bush has decided to cross the Rubicon with the help of some of his friends. He is breathing down the neck of the UN security council and taunting it daily to either sign on his dotted lines or let him go his way. In other words: pass the resolution authorising the US attack on Iraq or be bypassed. According to the Administration officials, the president's was a combative speech challenging the UN to enforce its own resolutions on disarming Iraq on stand aside while the US will take care of the Job by dealing with it militarily. The US would apparently

tion to US action. Mandela's message was poignant: We are really appalled by any country, whether a superpower or a small country that goes outside UN Jurisdiction and attacks an independent country.

The US could not care less and continues with its war preparation. The Defence officials said that the HQ of the US central command which would coordinate an assault on Iraq was being moved from Florida to Qatar where Pentagon was constructing a formidable military base. The cent com (central command) chief General Tommy Frank held a three hour meeting recently with Defence Secretary Rumsfeld and Joint Chiefs of staffs immediately after a ceremony to honour the Pentagon Victims of September 11 attacks. It seems that a spanking new version of Bush Doctrine unveils a unilateralist macho phase of US foreign policy

## Reality of Dalit oppression

The urgency of social reform



PROF. BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

FOR many urban Indians, the bustling reality of Dalit oppression is often softened by rare, but true, individual success stories. For instance, Ms Mayawati rules India's largest state. Until early 2001, the BJP had a Dalit president. More Dalits are in the middle bureaucracy today than before.

Untouchability of the overt, "in-your-face", kind has declined in the cities. The Dalit problem, the gradualist view goes, may be on the way to resolution...

This view requires a reality check. Nothing furnishes this better than a visit to Chakwara, a dusty village, barely 50 kilometres from Jaipur, Rajasthan.

Drive to Chakwara, and you plunge straight into Middle Age-style social servitude and economic bondage. At the centre of this is entrenched discrimination against Dalits, sanctified by religion.

For over a year, Chakwara has been in turmoil over the issue of

access to the common village pond. The pond and the steps leading to it (*ghats*) have been maintained over the years with state funds and village contributions, including the Dalits' too.

But the Dalits are barred from the *ghats*. "Tradition" treats them *lower* than the buffaloes and pigs which have access to the pond. (The only

17), Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, and above all, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 (POA).

The POA was drafted *explicitly* to punish anti-Dalit abuse. It defines abuse fairly comprehensively, i.e. beyond mere name-calling and barring Dalits' entry into places of

with sticks and *gophans* (slings to deliver heavy stones). The Dalits, sensing big trouble, terminated their rally. The *savarnas* attacked the police. More than 50 people were injured, including 44 policemen.

Today, the anti-Dalit confrontation has, ironically, pitted the state temporarily against the *savarnas*. This has encouraged the Bairwas to

of the classroom, and gross inequality in access to water and common lands.

Oppression of 160 million Dalits is an enduring reality of India's countryside. To be a Dalit means having to live a sub-human, degraded, insecure existence. Every hour, two Dalits are assaulted. Every day, three Dalit

reform of oppressive customs. India has had a great modernist social reform movement. This movement was integral to the Freedom Struggle. Indeed, it preceded it and infused content into its goals.

The reform movement's substantial gains in the last century were incorporated into the Constitution. But the momentum ran out by the 1950s, yielding to conservatism. This now finds its highest expression in casteist *Hindutva*.

The social reform movement must be revived. Without it, India won't be able to combat numerous evils like *sat* and bride-burning, or superstition, irrationalism, ignorance and illiteracy.

Ultimately, we must ask two questions: What is the meaning of development and progress, if the most wretchedly oppressed people remain subjugated? What does that say about our democracy? Is it acceptable that millions of Indians have no freedom, no human agency, no way of realising their elementary potential?

Secondly, can we tolerate gross injustice against the most underprivileged without generally legitimising large-scale injustice? Is that the way to a modern, open, just society?

**Postscript:** The horrific lynching of Dalits in Hajaraj (Haryana) in the presence of the police underscores both social reform's urgency and the VHP-Shiv Sena's vile *Hindutva* casteism.

However, administrative methods must be combined with purposive attempts to transform people's perceptions of "tradition" through a

**Oppression of 160 million Dalits is an enduring reality of India's countryside. To be a Dalit means having to live a sub-human, degraded, insecure existence. Every hour, two Dalits are assaulted. Every day, three Dalit women are raped; two Dalits are killed. This violence has a precise function: perpetuate social hierarchy, defend servitude, and preserve conditions for the ruthless exploitation of the poorest people.**

exception is women, irrespective of caste.)

On December 14 last, two Bairwa Dalits, Babulal and Radheshyam, defied hallowed "tradition" and took a dip in the pond. The caste Hindus subjected the Bairwa community to vile abuse, threats of a "bloodbath", a nightly siege of their *mohalla*, and a crippling social boycott.

No landowner would employ them; they couldn't buy even a cup of tea in the village; the local doctor won't treat them. Their men were stalked, their women abused.

The local administration and police should have acted with alacrity to protect the Dalits. Instead, they sided with the upper castes. Anti-Dalit discrimination is prohibited under the Constitution (Article

worship.

The police failed even to register a case against Chakwara's caste Hindus. Instead, in January, they bullied some Dalits into signing a "compromise", which erased their right to the pond. The agreement produced discontent which has simmered.

Last month, the discontent broke the surface: the Bairwas decided to assert their rights through a rally through the tehsil town Phagi, Chakwara in collaboration with the Centre for Dalit Human Rights, and People's Union of Civil Liberties. They aimed to take a collective dip in the pond.

The *savarnas* (caste Hindus) decided to "teach the Dalits a lesson". On September 21, a mob of 10-15,000 men gathered, armed

bathe in the pond regularly. But the *savarnas* have boycotted it.

Chakwara seethes with tension, fear and anger. Unless the Dalits are protected, there could be a bloody carnage. Rajasthan has recently seen many anti-Dalit atrocities, the worst of which was the 1992 Kurnher massacre of 17 Jatavs.

Rajasthan has a dismal record of offences against the Dalits, with an annual average of 5,024 crimes. These include 46 killings, 134 rapes, and 93 cases of grievous injury every year.

There is extensive discrimination against Dalits all over Rajasthan. These abuses include name-calling, prohibiting Dalit women from using footwear, denial of such services as the barber's, forcing Dalit schoolchildren to sit at the back

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This violence has a precise function: perpetuate social hierarchy, defend servitude, and preserve conditions for the ruthless exploitation of the poorest people.

Corrective measures are needurgently. The most important is applying the Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 to declare Chakwara "atrocities-prone". Then, a Monitoring Committee should survey abuses and prevent violence. Equally important is the Act's Section 4 which punishes public servants involved in anti-Dalit atrocities.

However, administrative methods must be combined with purposive attempts to transform people's perceptions of "tradition" through a

## OPINION

## So much more to do

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

RECENTLY the ruling party celebrated its one year in office. To my mind, the irony of it all is that on the one hand the government itself says that it should not be judged by a year's activities and at the same time it is projecting the party's "successes". The unfortunate part of all this is that over the years we have been hostages to the hands of our political leadership.

In a country where 50 per cent of its population go hungry and has access to hardly two meals a day, one has to be wary of celebrative mood. The government and even some of the external agencies confirm Bangladesh as being self-sufficient in food. They talk of bridges being built, speedier dispensation of justice here and there, the banning of polyethylene, the successes in fiscal and monetary planning including comparative increase in foreign currency reserve so on and so forth. All very fine. It is certainly not compensating for the more immediate and acute problems of no less importance.

The people are waiting for the day when their children will be safe on their way to schools and return home to their parents smiling. People are waiting for the day when our educational institutions will be free from the cancer of politics and return to a

healthy environment and their children will be able to pursue studies in peace and harmony. They are waiting for the day when it will be safe for them to move about freely without the fear of being mugged or gunned down by criminals. They are waiting for the day when our judiciary will be independent and dispensation of justice will not be "delayed". They are waiting for the day when they will no longer worry for a bare minimum living and livelihood. People are waiting for a whole lot more critical issues to be dealt with.

The government is talking of tax collection and introduction of stringent measures for enhancing internal revenue collection at a time when the state of our civic amenities remain in the most deplorable state. They want people to be more conscientious and pay taxes at a time when the power supplies are most erratic and have no positive indications of being any better in the coming days. The more the government promises for "better days" the worse it seemingly becomes. As for the claims to have improved the situation on the water supply front, all you have to do is to talk to the people who continue to face acute scarcities. One hears of modernising of telephone services, rationalising of domestic gas supplies so on and so forth. The more the authorities promise, the more complicated and inefficient they become. Though of lesser

consequence in the over-all national scenario the conditions of the capital city roads have become a nightmare.

The government neither says anything about the spiralling prices of consumable commodities nor does anything to control or mangle the market. The poor and the so-called middle class are in dire distress. Take any government since Bangladesh came into being, they have been consistent only in advancing corruption, inefficiency and utter mismanagement in complete disregard for the electorate and the people at large.

Over the years governments in this country have not only been non-transparent but also shown scant regard for public opinion. Our civil society and the so-called protagonists of democracy are very vocal and critical of undemocratic practices in many other countries in the LDC category. I would like to urge them to consider their own state. Have our governments been in any better in their mode of operations? A government is what a government does. It is neither a consumer product with a "brand name" nor is it a magic wand. Has our so-called democratic government been able to deliver anything towards the welfare of the people that they can rightfully boast of?

Prof. Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.