

NATIONAL GIRL CHILD DAY

Women and death from hunger

DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

ON July 24, 2003, *The Daily Star* published a report entitled "When death looks greener than starvation." The story behind the headline was that Dukhimon Begum, a 40-year old mother of four from Durgapur Upazila of Rajshahi district had a quarrel with her rickshaw-puller husband, Manik Chand, because she bought a saree for her niece on the occasion of the latter's marriage. The family did not have any food to eat that night and the husband went to pull rickshaw next morning hungry. Faced with starvation, Dukhimon fed her two small daughters pesticide-laced biscuits and took some herself in order to be free from the misery. Little Moni, 6, and Mitu, 8, died, but the mother survived.

*The Daily Prothom Alo* of 18 September published another report under the headline "Mother said, 'no food, eat poison'; the naughty girl did so." As the story goes, Motalab Matubbar of Hajikandi village of Madaripur district left home six months ago in search of work. His wife, Chandra Banu, has been supporting the family of two daughters and a son by working as a maid in neighbours' houses. During the recent incessant rain, Chandra Banu could not work and get any food for her children. In Shibchar Hospital, the mother told the newsmen that for the last two days she had no food to cook. Starving Rumana asked her for food. Frustrated, she told the girl to take poison. That night Rumana drank pesticide to take her life.

The above incidents represent the most cruel and ultimate solution to hunger. However, such incidents are not common, although there is a commonality in them. The commonality is that girls and women usually take their lives because of hunger, boys do not. Boys normally have other options - other than committing suicide.

It is not surprising that girls or

women face cruel deaths in the face of hunger. Because of the prevailing patriarchal mindset, women are the poorest of the poor, hungriest of the hungry and most powerless among the powerless. Deprived throughout history, women suffer most in any calamity, whether natural or manmade. The society has also accepted it. For, most of us -- in our thoughts and actions, beliefs and attitudes, consciously and unconsciously -- are intolerant to women and some are even against women.

Deprivation of women is almost as old as human history. Our

Throughout history, mankind has been fighting persistently and valiantly against hunger. Yet hunger and hunger related deaths persist. However, one critical area where we can make a big difference, if we are serious, is to change the condition of deprivations of and discriminations against women. We can also create opportunities for girls and provide an enabling environment for their growth and development.

sayings and our folklores are full of stories of marginalisation and dehumanisation of women -- which obviously reflect the conditions in the society. Even the sculptures found in historic Mohastangar depict the story of mistreatment of women by men. These clearly indicate that over centuries men spent a great deal of their creative energies on humiliating women.

Along with physical and mental tortures, the society has also created an image of "ideal" women which does not serve them well. Women have been severely depriving themselves while trying to be perfect women and perfect wives. To meet these illusive images, they have been silently enduring mistreatments, compliantly accepting deprivations, and even eating last and the least. Such is the life of the women of Bangladesh -- discriminated against from the cradle to the

grave. The consequence of this dehumanising condition can be truly fatal in poverty stricken societies. The cruel deaths of Mitu, Moni and Rumana is a blunt reminder of it. Yet we do not seem to get it!

Even though such suicidal deaths seldom happen, people -- especially children -- regularly die of hunger. Causes of deaths of the Moni's are visible, but more devastating is invisible or silent hunger. According to the World Food Programme, worldwide 24,000 of our fellow human beings die of hunger everyday. By the

estimates of the World Bank and UNICEF, 600-700 people die of hunger-related causes in Bangladesh per day. Victims are usually children, mostly girl children. These deaths have been happening day after day, week after week and year after year.

According to UNICEF's State of the Children 2004, a total of 3,23,000 of Bangladeshi children under the age of five suffered from malnutrition in 2002. They suffered from invisible or chronic persistent hunger. Invisible hunger is a silent killer. The immune system of malnourished children does not fully develop. As a result, children die of diseases like diarrhea, which is not viewed as a fatal disease. Over 2,50,000 of our children die of diarrhea every year. However, diarrhea accounts for only 19 per cent of hunger related deaths. Others die of other hunger related diseases. For example, chronic

respiratory infection kills 19 per cent, measles 7 per cent, malaria 5 per cent, perinatal 18 per cent and other diseases 32 per cent. Although the apparent causes of these deaths are different diseases, malnutrition is the hidden cause.

Hunger related deaths are most unwarranted. There is no natural calamity behind them. Nor there is man-made conflict. Such deaths in a sense represent a "genocide," whose cause is invisible or chronic persistent hunger. In an increasingly prosperous world, hunger related deaths are a great affront to the humanity.

Visible deaths hit the sensibility of the people harder. Even a few deaths reported in the media affect people more than the innumerable deaths occurring silently every day. However, it is time to give serious attention to chronic persistent hunger. The wide and aggressive consequences of such hunger must be duly recognised and urgently redressed.

Even though malnutrition is a silent killer, its sources are not unknown. There are three important sources of malnutrition: lack of calories, lack of protein and micronutrients, and worms. According to nutrition experts, an adult needs about 2,200 calories per day. However, those who do more physical labour, need more calories. If a person does not get enough calories from food intake, she/he is bound to suffer from malnutrition. In spite of taking enough calories, a person may still suffer from malnutrition, if the foods do not contain the required amount of protein and micronutrients such as iodine. In addition, worms consume part of the food eaten, causing malnutrition, especially among children.

The prevailing widespread malnutrition in Bangladesh has created a vicious "circle of malnutrition". Women are the unwilling conduits. Women are deprived from their childhoods. At infancy, they get less food and attention than the boys. At puberty, most of them get confined within four walls. They are denied of education and healthcare. Their development is thus thwarted. Before they reach adulthood and are physically and mentally ready, they are married off. Soon they become mothers, giving birth to children of low birth weight. Most newly born girls also go through a similar cycle of deprivations and despair. This is how the malnourished and marginalised women keep the cycle of malnutrition going, the consequences of which fall upon everyone over generations, irrespective of gender.

The whole nation pays dearly for the persistence of malnutrition. According to available statistics, the average height of Bangladeshi boys decreased 7 per cent during 1930-82. Because of low birth weight and malnutrition, children become physically weak and their mental growth is severely hampered. Consequently, the nation becomes deprived of their productivity and contributions -- some of them even become burdens on the society. In 1998, UNICEF claimed that if the incidence of malnutrition was not arrested, Bangladesh would loose \$2.300 crore over the next 10 years. According to a recent World Bank estimate, Bangladesh looses about \$1 billion worth of productivity per year because of chronic malnutrition.

Throughout history, mankind has been fighting persistently and valiantly against hunger. Yet hunger and hunger related deaths persist. It is clear that there is no easy solution to this challenge. Nor there is any magic formula. The solution will, among other things, require the very difficult task of changing the basic economic and social structure that keeps hunger in place. However, one critical area where we can make a big difference, if we are serious, is to change the condition of deprivations of and discriminations against women. We can also create opportunities for girls and provide an enabling environment for their growth and development. Such changes greatly depend on us as individuals and families. Truly, unprecedented new possibilities can unfold with the transformation of our patriarchal attitudes and mindset.

We look forward to the day when all of us can work together for building a society where the Dukhimon's and Chandra Banu's would not have to hand out poison to their beloved children; the little Moni and Mitu's would not have to disappear in oblivion even before they had a chance to blossom; and adolescents like Rumana would not have to seek freedom in death. We all have the responsibility to create such a society. Inculcating that sense of responsibility is the purpose of the National Girl Child Day, celebrated on 30th September each year.

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Celebrating Lailat-ul-Baraat

SYED ASHRAF ALI

ALMOST everybody in Bangladesh celebrates Lailat-ul-Baraat as an auspicious night. But there are unfortunately some who inadvertently claim that Lailat-ul-Baraat has no religious significance in the eyes of Islam. Nothing can be farther from the truth. It is true that Lailat-ul-Baraat has not been specifically mentioned in the Holy Quran (although mention is there of Lailat-ul-Mubarakatun), but there are numerous authentic Ahadith and historical evidence which testify so eloquently to the fact that the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself used to attach great importance to this auspicious night. He not only said special prayers in this sacred night but also visited graveyards and prayed for the departed souls on this holy occasion. He even instructed his wives to honour the sanctity, divine excellence and majesty of this blessed occasion. What is more, a reliable tradition also testifies that Bibi-Ayesha Siddiqi (RA) visited a graveyard in this Mubarak Night of Privilege in search of the holy Prophet of Islam (pbuh).

Of the nights in a year there are six which may safely be marked out for their grandeur and majesty, serenity and sacredness. These are Lailat-ul-Qadr, Lailat-ul-Miraj, the two nights of Eids, the Night of Arafat and Lailat-ul-Baraat. On these auspicious occasions are a person's prayers, his or her outpourings of the heart's sentiments, the reverential expression of the soul's sincerest desires before its Maker, never fail to evoke the most coveted response from Benign Providence.

Lailatul-Baraat, the glorious night on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Shaban, is popularly known as Shab-e-Baraat in this subcontinent. Both the words Shab in Persian (and Urdu as well) and Lailat in Arabic means "Night", and 'Baraat stands for Salvation or Privilege. (Some, however, inadvertently think that the word is Barat, which means "Fortune", and the auspicious night is the Night of Fortune). It is on this Night of Privilege that Rabbul Alameen, in His infinite Mercy, blesses each and every person with a unique opportunity to receive the most coveted Divine Mercy. Acclaimed traditionalist Ibn Maja (his Sunan is

universally accepted as one of the Sihah Sitta, the six authentic traditional works) reported on the authority of no less a person than Sher-e-Khuda Hazrat Ali Ibn Abu Talib (RA) that the holy Prophet (pbuh) said, "On this Night, from the moment the sun sets, Allah descends on the firmament of this earth and goes on asking till sunrise: "Is there any seeker of salvation, so that I may give it to him; is there any one in need of food, so that I may feed him; is there any one suffering, so that I may cure him?"

The encyclopaedia of Islam, published in Leiden, Netherlands corroborates this claim when it says, "In Hadith it is said that in this Night Allah descends to the lowest

two rakat and the rest of the Night through a long "Sejda" or prostration. What is more, the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) used to offer this prayer with inimitable dedication and unfathomable concentration.

It is also reported that the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "Allah forgives every Muslim in this Night. He does not, however, forgive the Mushrek, the jealous, the cruel, and the adulterer" (Baihaqi). There are also many Ahadith which very clearly indicate that the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) not only said special prayers in this sacred Night but also visited the graveyards and prayed for the departed souls. He

The very spirit of such a noble and auspicious occasion will be lost if those who are affluent fail to share the good fortunes with those who are less privileged. Islam is a social religion. A Muslim should seek Allah's Rahmat through the welfare of his fellow-beings and not through self-centred lbadat. No wonder, the holy Prophet (pbuh) very emphatically declares: "he is the best who does most for the welfare of mankind."

heaven, from there He calls mortals in order to grant them forgiveness of sins. " (Tirmidhi, Sunan, B.39). (Tirmidhi's Sunan is also considered to be one of the six authentic traditional works). No wonder, the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), the best of all creations, never failed to avail this unique and glorious opportunity and himself used to pray all through this Night of Privilege every year with a view to receiving Mercy from the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah.

Although Lailat ul-Baraat has not been mentioned directly or specifically in the Holy Quran, it does not empower any Muslim to ignore or make little of the Divine excellence of the Night of the 15<sup>th</sup> of Shaban simply because there are numerous other authentic Ahadith in addition to the two mentioned above which testify so eloquently to the fact that the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) himself used to say special prayers on this holy night: Records are there that on one occasion he (peace be upon him) spent half of this auspicious Night of Privilege through a Nafl prayer of

also instructed his wives to honour the sanctity and Divine Majesty of this blessed Night.

It is not only the renowned traditionalists who champion the sacredness and excellence of the Night of Privilege but even a great and universally respected saint and scholar like Hazrat Syed Abdul Quader Jilani (RA), popularly known as Hazrat Bara Pir Sahib, testifies in his Guniyat Talebin that Bibi Ayesha Siddiqi (RA) herself heard the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) saying, "Allah opens the Doors of Mercy and Grace for the mankind on four Nights -- the two Nights of Eids, the Night of the 15<sup>th</sup> of Shaban, and the Night of Arafat." (The two other Nights, Shab-e-Qadr and Shab-e-Miraj, have been specifically referred to in the Holy Quran)." The doors remain open throughout the Nights till the Fajr prayers."

Glorious incidents like these testify so brilliantly to the holy Prophet's (peace be upon him) belief in the importance, sanctity, serenity and divine excellence of the auspicious Night of Privilege.

The Night of Salvation

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

OUR holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) has laid emphasis on the meticulous observance of Shab-e-Baraat or the night of salvation. During the holy month of Shaban we must not be oblivious of emulating his inimitable example. What do we mean by the term "Shab-e-Baraat?"

"Shab" is a Persian word and it means night; and "Baraat" is also a Persian word which means salvation. So, the term "Shab-e-Baraat" means Night of Salvation. We may now therefore divert our attention to what the holy Prophet (pbuh) did vis-a-vis observance of this very important night of the lunar month of Shaban. We may now see what the consort of the holy Prophet (pbuh) Hazrat Aishah Siddiqi (RA), according to sacred Baihaqi Hadis, once said. She said, "I have heard the holy Prophet (SM) saying on the 15th night of the month of Shaban in prayer, 'O Allah! Because of Your forgiveness I want to get rid of your punishment. Through Your pleasure I want salvation of Your anger...'"

When the holy Prophet (SM) was asked by Hazrat Aishah Siddiqi (RA) about the aforesaid prayer in the following morning he answered, "O Aishah! Learn this prayer and tell others to learn this prayer because Jibrail (AS) taught me this prayer and asked to read it repeatedly while prostrating before Benign Allah."

The great saint Hazrat Abdul Quadir Jilani (RA) has said in his famous book "Guliabit Talibin" that Hazrat Aishah (RA) heard our holy Prophet (SM) saying, "Almighty Allah opens the door for his 'Bandas' (servants) during the four nights of the year, and they are: Two Eid nights, the 15th night of the month of Shaban and the night of Arafah."

It will be worthwhile to recall here another sacred Hadis of our holy Prophet. According to Ibn-e-Khazaima Aishah (RA) has also stated that one night she observed that the holy Prophet (pbuh) was prostrating on his prayer mat while offering his "Tahajjud" (late night prayer) and the duration of his prostration "(sajda)" was so unusual and inordinate that she apprehended he was breathing his last. But when she touched his foretoe and pressed it, the holy Prophet (SM) responded and after finishing his prayer asked his dear consort, "Aishah! have you any idea about this night? In reply, she said All-Knowing Allah and his Messenger (SM) knew it best, then he told her, "Tonight is the 15th night of the month of Shaban. Those who seek Benign Allah's forgiveness He forgives them. Those who seek His mercy and pity He bestows His bounties on them. But those who

are inimical to others they are deprived of such bounties. They are not forgiven."

It was also the holy Prophet's (SM) usual practice, besides offering special prayers on the 15th night of the lunar month of Shaban (Shab-e-Baraat), to visit graveyard

money and materials. The great religion does not either approve that the devotees deeply absorbed in supplicating Merciful Allah in their respective local mosques or in their respective houses should be disturbed. Islam also does not permit that patients, old and ailing

It is undesirable and painful that there are people, particularly the youngsters, who take interest in banging crackers and displaying firework during the sacred Night of Salvation. Islam does not sanction useless merry-making, nor does it approve of sheer wastage of money and materials. The great religion does not either approve that the devotees deeply absorbed in supplicating Merciful Allah in their respective local mosques or in their respective houses should be disturbed.

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people should be deprived of their much-needed rest and mental peace. The deafening sound of crackers does not help the devotees nor does it help the passersby. Let our youngsters refrain themselves from such abominable practices. Parents and guardians may, please, play their effective role in this regard.

The lunar month of Shaban and

Lailat-ul-Baraat (or Lailat al-Bara'a), the Night of Quittancy in the words of the encyclopaedia of Islam, is indeed a solemn and sacred occasion of Divine Excellence which has to be celebrated in a befitting way, not through candles and crackers, not through mere Halwas and Rotis, not through extravagance and merry-making, but through prayers and penance as was done by the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It is true that hundreds and thousands of Muslims in Bangladesh celebrate this Night through zealous and active participation in private and congregational prayers held in mosques. Unfortunately, however, there are many among us who, through sheer ignorance or utter carelessness, turn this auspicious night into a mere occasion of merry-making and gaiety, fun and frolic, forgetting the very essence of this glorious Night.

There are some who think that crackers and candles are part and parcel of Shab-e-Baraat. Nothing can be farther from the truth. This awful custom, introduced by the Barmecides in Baghdad, simply because they were fire worshippers and loved fire even after they accepted Islam, not only disturbs the Namazis and mediators on this auspicious Night but also leads to unnecessary wastage and prodigality which are forbidden in Islam. There are also some who try to equate Halwas and Rotis with the sacred Night of Privilege. There is no harm if delicious Halwas and other sweetmeats are cooked on this occasion, but let these be prepared only to be shared with the poor and the have-nots. The very spirit of such a noble and auspicious occasion will be lost if those who are affluent fail to share the good fortunes with those who are less privileged. Islam is a social religion. A Muslim should seek Allah's Rahmat through the welfare of his fellow-beings and not through self-centred lbadat. No wonder, the holy Prophet (pbuh) very emphatically declares: "he is the best who does most for the welfare of mankind."

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