

Eid: Past and present

DR. MIZANUR RAHMAN SHELLEY

If the splendid illumination of the shopping centers and the milling crowds in Dhaka are any indication, Eid-ul-Fitr this year, promises to be a festival of many splendoured joy. It seems that the commercial propellers of major social festivals are determined to make Eid-ul-Fitr 2004 a special event. But then all Eids are special. Coming in the wake of the holy month of Ramadan, the time of fasting for Muslims seeking purification and salvation, Eid-ul-Fitr is the epitome of well-earned delight. Its appeal is universal to the members of the Muslim community all over the world. To the Muslims, it is a day of incomparable joy and profound fellowship.

Eid-ul-Fitr has been traditionally observed as the principal festival of the majority of Bangladeshis Bengalees through untold centuries. The form and shape of the festivals changed with time. But the essentials remained unchanged. The Morning Prayer symbolizes joyful reunion. Visits to the homes of near and dear ones, relatives and friends mark the occasion with reinforced fellow-feeling and friendship. Varied and plentiful tasty dishes for those who can afford these are indivisible part of the day of delight. Even those with meagre means mobilise all their resources to arrange improved diet. New clothes, ornaments and shoes are a must for all, specially the children. Each and everything has to symbolise a new beginning. Eid, essentially, is a day of renewal of the spirit of everlasting joy.

In Bangladesh, in recent times, Eid-ul-Fitr appears to have been charged with a new significance. Many and varied dimensions seem to have been added to what in times past was a much simpler manifestation of the shared joy of an entire community. There is wider and more active participation. No doubt that the continuously increasing population has something to do with the expansion of the scale of participation.

The forty million of the 1950s became seventy million in the 1960s and nearly 140 million in 2004. The overwhelming majority of this increased population is Muslim. No wonder then that Eid in Bangladesh in the present times is celebrated by many more people than before.

It is not only the absolute number of population that has changed the character of the festival. The quality of a smaller, though very significant segment of the population also plays a role. Thanks to the newfound resources in the hands of this section of the people, there is for them now more money to spend, to buy new attires, jewelries, shoes, other gifts and delicious and expensive food. All this appears to make Eid a more lively occasion. On account of increased financial resources in possession of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, shopping becomes a vigorous and almost massive activity nationwide. From this point of view, Eid in present-day Bangladesh, is no more contained in one single day. On the contrary, it seems to signify a veritable season lasting over an entire month or even more. Shopping spree, for the able many, begins virtually with the inception of Ramadan. Renunciation goes, so to say, hand in hand with an irresistible urge for acquiring new possessions.

Even for those endowed with less resources, the season of Eid is one of desperate search for affordable gifts for near and dear ones, particularly the children. Eid leaves its calling cards everywhere: in the busy and crowded streets of cities and towns, in the time old village bazaars, in the mansions of the rich and mighty and in the shanties and huts of the poor and deprived.

Why has Eid assumed such magnified and massive dimensions in today's Bangladesh? What is the measure of the change in scale and intensity? There is no simple answer. Nevertheless, a

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journey down the memory-lane may hold some clue to the key to the transformation.

One remembers the time of early childhood in Calcutta (now Kolkata), the capital of United Bengal under the British Raj. Eid was joy in a community that constituted a vibrant and significant minority in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Sub-Continent that was still undivided. The delight of observing a basically religious festival in a varied society had a simple splendour. It combined a communal festival with friendly understanding and exchange with devotees of other faiths. The new clothes and shoes were there. So were the tasty dishes. All gifts were rolled in a package of parental love and affection. Wealth and riches did not drown all. The invaluable gift of love shone like a priceless gem.

One also remembers Eid in one's village home, some 20 miles south of Dhaka across flowing rivers and meandering canals. The mosque under shady trees, the congregation of simple rural folks in new, clean and inexpensive clothings, smiling children in colourful dress, tasty food that did not burden the guardians with humble means and the everlasting happiness of joy shared all sketched an enduring portrait of delight with indelible colours.

Then, in the mid 70s there were Eid celebrations in London. The multi-ethnic congregations in Regent Park mosque were veritable carnivals of many races and colours united in a common faith, sharing in joyful festivals. There were numerous people with their children. The mosque and its compound, though spacious, was inadequate to comfortably contain

the crowd. There were often exuberant rush and one feared that ones' children would fall victim to stampede. However, tolerant joyfulness prevailed and all eventually went well.

One also remembers the times in the 1950s and 60s when Dhaka was a provincial capital, growing with steady planned steps, not yet

overcrowded or bent under the weight of grotesque and heartless multistoried monstrosities. Eid in Dhaka, as in the whole of the then East Bengal, was a simple, joyful uncrowded time.

Things have changed, though not in basic terms, since the birth of Bangladesh as a sovereign state. The canons of the sanguinary

struggle for the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 were nationalism, democracy, secularism and socialism. Socialism has disappeared with the demise of the system in Eastern Europe and collapse of the then erstwhile Soviet Union. The other values including secularism or at least non-communalism still dominate the Bangladeshi polit-

ico-social system. Nevertheless, the dynamics of a predominantly Muslim society operate with quiet strength. The Muslims of Bangladesh are God-fearing but not fanatics. The intensification and widening of Islamic religious values, rites and rituals are evidently visible. The increased enthusiasm for religious festivals like Eid is a manifestation of this phenomenon.

The other reason of greater enthusiastic participation in Eid festivities may relate to the lack of manifold avenues of entertainment and recreation for the masses. What is scarce, even absent at other times, are sought to

be made up during the Eid festivals.

A major feature of Eid in Bangladesh is the virtual emptying of the big cities, including Dhaka during Eid. The predominantly rural character of the society, despite fast growing urbanization, is borne out by the return of millions to their village homes to celebrate Eid. Dhaka becomes bereft of nearly half of its population. The sparsely populated city during the Eid holidays assumes the look and flavour of Dhaka of the 1960s.

The massive movement, though temporary, of the bulk of the masses to the villages for observing Eid reminds one of the sadness of deprivation of the rural many who are poor. That poverty is a fact of life and detracts from the general mood of festivity. One is bewildered by flashy advertisements for expensive Eid-wears which cost several hundred thousand taka. One is also sorry that ostentation is accompanied by heart-rending poverty and want. Pending the winter harvest there is hunger stalking some of the rural areas. One wonders if things have changed much since the rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote his touching poem during the British Raj:

The crescent has risen in the Western sky

Where are you hiding in shame,
O' Belal, in a forgotten corner of
a desert cemetery.....

...Look, the peasants are walking
to the Eid congregation

Like Dead-alive beings.
Belal, your voice chokes

Even as you sound the call to the
Eid prayer.

One of the farmers has lost his
child

Only a few days ago,
Is the crescent moon

A reflection of the rib
Of the innocent child

Who is no more?

Dr. Mizanur Rahman Shelley, a social scientist, is the founder Chairman, Centre for Development Research, Bangladesh (CDRB), Editor, quarterly 'Asian Affairs', Overseas Director, American Institute of Bangladesh Studies (AIBS) and Chief Adviser, City University, Bangladesh.



An Iftar bazaar during Ramadan

PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Festivity in the official world

AMM SHAWKAT ALI

EID-UL-FITR is one of the two religious festivals of the Muslim community. It is also interpreted as a social event in that friends and relations visit their respective homes on the day. The sighting of the moon confirms the day on which Eid will be celebrated. It is guided by the lunar calendar. It is mandatory that moon be sighted to celebrate Eid the following day. This is the practice throughout the Muslim world.

During Pakistan days and thereafter, the institutional mechanism to determine on which day Eid would be celebrated was to be called Ruwaiyat-e-Hilal Committee. The committee would consist of religious leaders besides officials. Usually the committee would sit for iftar on the last day of the holy month of Ramadan. The field administrators such as the Deputy Commissioners (DCs) would be alerted to immediately communicate to the committee if moon were sighted in their respective districts. DCs then would fall back on the Sub-divisional Officers (SDOs) for such information. SDOs again would rely on the Circle Officers (Development) for this. SDOs are no longer there. Nor are the Circle Officers. One would think that DCs now rely on the Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs) to get the needed information and DCs, in turn, feed the moon sighting committee.

Prior to 1971, both the telecommunications system and other means of communications were not as developed as these are today. The nation-wide dialling (NWD) system was virtually absent. Many subdivisions, now districts, had nothing but manual exchange. However, whether or not to celebrate Eid was a decision that the moon sighting committee located at the capital of Pakistan would decide. The decision would be broadcast over radio for information of the people.

The decision thus communicated would be the official decision binding on all and sundry. In those days, usually the city of Peshawar would be the first to sight the moon. It is said that once during the reign of Ayub Khan there was a problem. None of the districts could report the sighting of the moon till late night. Elderly people recall that

when they were about ready to have Sehri in the small hours of the morning, loud came the radio broadcast that Eid was to be celebrated next morning. There was lot of confusion but the relatively young ones in the family were happy mainly for two reasons. First, they would be able to put on new clothes. Second, they would get Eidi (cash money) from the elders. The elderly ones would also be happy to say good bye to the month of fasting.

The tradition of moon sighting committee has continued after 1971. The committee would be led by the Home Secretary. The meetings would be held in the conference room of the cabinet division. The Imams of important mosques would sit around the table as would be the selected officials. DC Dhaka would also be present as a member of the committee. One such DC recalls to have attended the meeting

Newspaper reports indicate that the government had declared Eid holidays effective from November 13, 2004. There is a weekly holiday on November 12 which is a Friday. November 11 being the day of Shabe Qadr, offices were closed. This means that from November 11 to 16, the public servants across the country will enjoy holiday. Add two days prior to November 11 and another three days after 16 November. November 19 is Friday. It is likely that government offices would not be fully functional before November 22 or 23.

way back in 1977.

The meeting started prior to the iftar. All arrangements were made to serve iftar. There would be discussions of all sorts but mainly relating to the country or countries where moon had been sighted already and Eid celebrated. There were some innocent questions from some members about the need to follow a date uniformly applicable to all Muslim countries. Others, specially the religious leaders, took pains to contest such a line of reasoning on

the ground that to celebrate Eid, one must first sight the moon.

On that particular occasion, no report from any of the 22 districts came in time. Iftar was over and so was the maghrif prayer. Two hours after Iftar, came the news that moon was sighted in Thakurgaon. It had to be verified also by further telephone calls.

The responsibility for sighting the moon appears to have now shifted from the Home ministry to the ministry of Religious Affairs.

Meetings are now held, as was reported in the press, in the Islamic foundation. Probably, the mechanism of getting information from the district is the same.

It has been said that the official announcement of the sighting of the moon would be binding on everyone. In recent times, it is reported by the media that there are few non-conformists. It is said that a section of our citizens in Faridganj Upazila (thana) of Chandpur district usually cele-

brate Eid a day before the officially determined day. However, the vast majority are conformists. They accept without question the date fixed by the government.

What happens on Eid Day
It is customary for the senior officers to exchange Eid greeting with the president and the prime minister. In terms of precedence, the president comes first. Hundreds flock to Bangabhaban. There is usually a long cue. Then starts the ritual of shaking hands in the glare of camera lights. The more important functionaries such as the ministers or other top politicians are caught in the camera to be shown on the TV. The lesser mortals are kept out of the camera shots as they are not worthy of any attention.

There is also the exchange of greetings ceremony with the prime minister. The crowd in this case is larger as it is also open to the public. Since our prime ministers have been ladies since 1991, there is, consistent with Islamic tradition, no shaking of hands. The officials just raise their hands to say Eid Mubarak or Asalam Alaikum and pass on to the place where there are some snacks and sweets. You just have a bite, if you feel like, and then get into the exit route to find your vehicles. This is an arduous task given the large number of vehicles parked outside security zone.

Next comes the other duty of visiting ministers. Some ministers may give prior indication of the time when they would be available. In such places also there would be crowd but much less than the two places already mentioned. After this comes another round of the exchange of greetings with the secretaries to the government. The heads of departments and other senior officials would visit the houses of their respective secretaries. The first question that a visitor would ask is 'Sir, where did your perform your Eid prayers'. This

would come in a repetitive refrain from each of the visitors coming at different times. Even though the visitors are the same persons, the question would be repeated each year. Perhaps this is a prelude to further conversation.

Sometimes cynics have wondered if the ritual of visiting the very very important persons (VVIPs) and very important persons (VIPs) is just a social or official responsibility. Where do you draw the line? The perception among most officials in this regard tends to suggest that it is more of an official responsibility than just social one. Invitation from the president or the prime minister must not be ignored. It amounts to being discourteous. Even so, in the view of many officials, there is an element of social attraction too. If you go, you come across many people at one place in the room where snacks and sweets are served. You may not otherwise meet them. After Eid holidays

A large number of junior functionaries, who do not visit the secretary or the minister on Eid day for various reasons, would start doing so at the secretariat on the first working day. For the secretary or the minister it is quite a tiresome exercise. But they have to put up with it. However, in most cases, there would be fixed hours, say from 11 am for an hour or so. In such occasion, embracing between the visitors and the persons visited is more a rule than an exception. The ladies working in the ministry would come in a group, stand at one corner of the room exchange greetings and then leave.

On that day, there is no work because all laze around. They visit their colleagues in other ministries. The next two or three days also would be less official work than would be the case in a normal working day. Why? Many officials, specially those at the lower end of the hierarchy, would be out of station on leave in their village or district towns. The office would require two to three days to warm up and be back on the rails. No one has cared to know how many man-hours are lost in the whole process.

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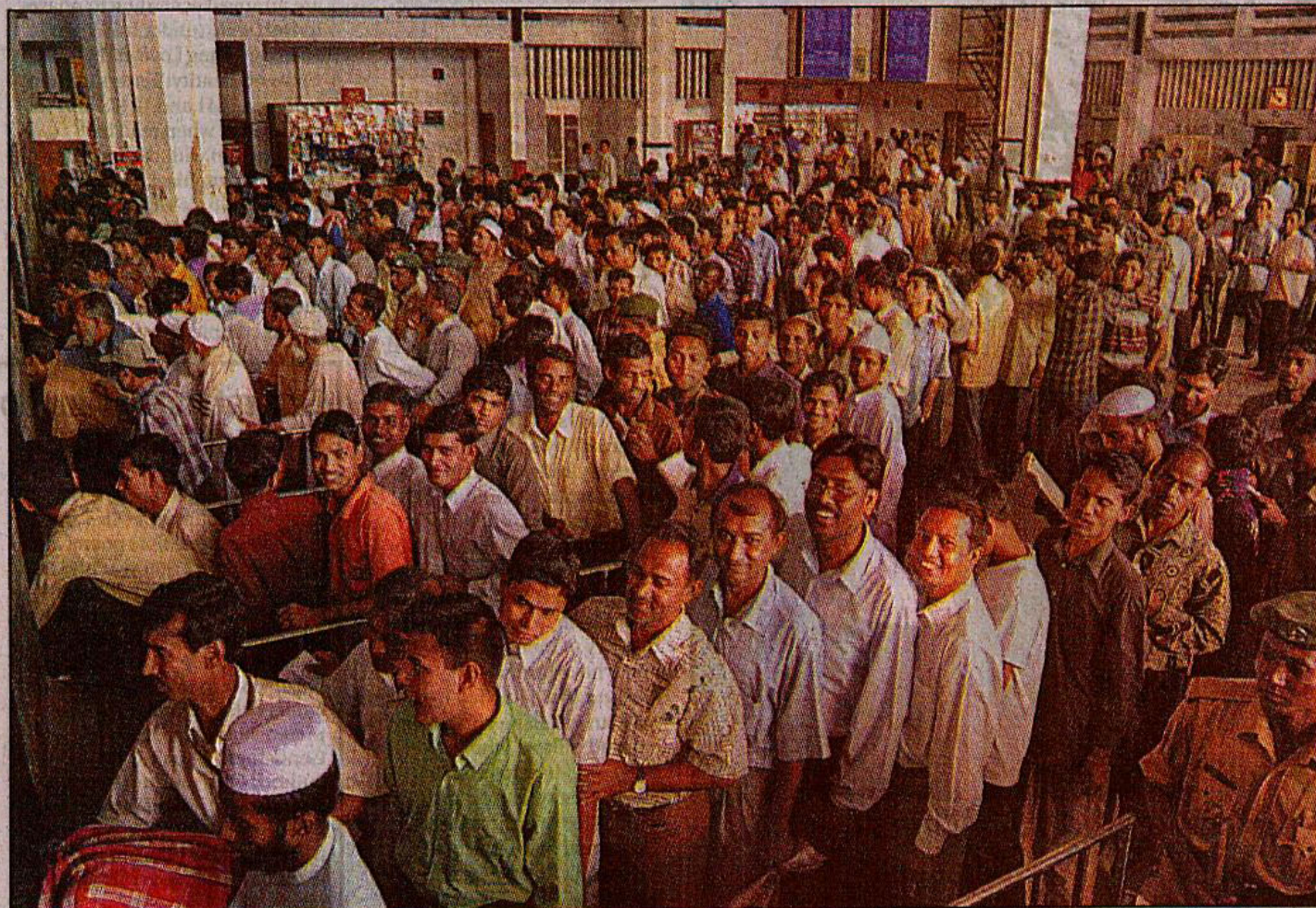
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Reverse flow

In the olden times, the officers stationed at the districts and Upazilas would never think of coming to Dhaka or even going to their village homes. The major reason was the highly undeveloped state of communications plus the cost and hassle involved. It is believed that now-a-days, there is a reverse flow from the districts and Upazilas mainly to Dhaka. There is widespread public and official perception that Upazila level officials do not want to stay at their respective place of work. Most wish to be stationed in Dhaka where their families are because of the compulsion of children's education. It is said that these officials lose no time to flock to Dhaka to join their families during Eid. If this reverse flow is stopped, Eid would be less of a social event for them.

There is an interesting anecdote of a commissioner of a division about the reverse flow. This happened in 1986. Two weeks before Eid, the commissioner rang up the cabinet secretary and sought his permission to leave station during Eid holidays. The cabinet secretary turned down the request saying that it was only fit and proper that the administrative head of a division should not be out of station during Eid holidays. He did not spell out the logic behind such a line of reasoning. Luckily for the commissioner, his order of transfer to Dhaka came five days before the Eid holidays. The commissioner took the first flight out of his station to reach Dhaka and joined his new place of work. Next day, he called on the cabinet secretary. The latter asked 'How come you left your station so fast? When you were sent to the division, you delayed joining as commissioner'. 'Sir, I cannot be late both ways' was the reply. Both of them then had a hearty laugh.

AMM Shawkat Ali, PhD is ex-Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture



Homebound for Eid

PHOTO: SK ANAMUL HUQ