

Message of Eid-ul-Azha

Spirit of sacrifice is the essence

MUSLIMS around the world celebrate Eid-ul-Azha tomorrow with great solemnity. It is the second biggest religious festival of Muslims which brings people from all walks of life together in a serene and exalted mood of introspection and reunion. It is as much an occasion to celebrate as to elevate ourselves to a higher plane where everything is subservient to the wishes of Almighty Allah. The underlying significance of the episode in which Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) was ready to sacrifice his beloved son is that the faith of a devotee is ultimately tested by the yardstick of his loyalty to the Creator.

However, Muslims in every corner of the world are not so lucky to observe the occasion the way they would have liked to. For example, the Asian tsunami washed hundreds and thousands of people away, killed many more, and rendered a few million homeless, even rootless. On another level, the people of Palestine have not yet won their well-deserved independence. They are passing through a very critical phase of their existence following the death last year of Yasser Arafat. And Iraq is bleeding with the future of the nation being extremely unclear. So the sense of collectivity, the essence of Islamic brotherhood, is somehow marred by international politics. The holy Eid is an occasion to pray for an end to the sufferings of the Muslims in distress, and, in the same spirit, for mankind as a whole.

The misfortune that has befallen a section of the Umma must not lead anybody to believe that violent reprisals are the answer to it. Far from that, Islam is the religion of peace and it lays great emphasis on communal harmony. Religion must not be brought into local or international politics. Eid-ul-Azha evokes a deep sense of religiosity, so pristine that it does not lend itself to any mundane use of religion as such.

It teaches us to sacrifice and not to indulge in mindless gluttony and feasting. The Eid festival is unique where celebrations and prayers take place side by side.

On a more mundane level, we need the municipal disposal services after a large number of animals are sacrificed with the entrails and blood splashes in evidence here and there. The DCC had done well to keep the city clean after the Eid in the last two or three years, and one expects that it will be doing even better this year. People in general should also show a greater sensitivity to the issue.

Eid Mubarak to all.

Economy on the mend

MCCI's observations merit attention

A survey recently conducted by the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (MCCI) on business climate in the country has portrayed a positive outlook of the economy. It is relieving to learn that the economy is picking up following the massive flooding and unfavourable weather conditions in the first few months of the current fiscal year. Obviously, agriculture was the worst-hit and its growth faltered on account of the floods. But there are positive signs in other areas in terms of demand for more credit, greater disbursement of term loans, increased production in the manufacturing sector, higher collection of VAT -- all of these going to indicate that the economy is on a recovery path.

However, MCCI has identified poor implementation of the annual development programme (ADP) in the first half of the year as a threat to the economy. Only 10 percent of the ADP has been utilised at this half-way point, a record low pace of implementation. And the concern expressed by the MCCI that the ADP may not be implemented fully for the second year running only increases that worry. No wonder, the business community finds itself in a disadvantageous situation. Because lack of government investment in essential sectors like energy, road etc. have reduced their competitiveness vis-à-vis their counterparts in other countries of the region.

It's undoubtedly a plus for the business environment that the government initiative to contain toll collection has proved successful to a certain extent. We have to say though, that a greater emphasis needs to be placed on rule of law and increase in good governance. It is important that Chittagong port be rejuvenated. Enforcing the one-stop service at the port to reduce bureaucratic tangles is a step forward, but the challenge is to sustain the arrangement. And lastly, in order to continue with this economic growth, political uncertainties will have to be left behind. We need that for a positive and secure future.

Keeping the faith



ZAFAR SOBHAN

EID-UL-AZHA is just around the corner. Watching images of the Hajj on TV and seeing how the Dhaka streets have emptied as people return to their villages to spend this holiday with their near and dear ones and sensing the mood of tranquillity that has descended on the country, I am reminded of my thoughts on returning to Dhaka in December in the midst of the annual Biswa Jtama.

That too had been an impressive outpouring of faith, with an estimated four million participants thronging Tongi for the occasion. What I was reminded of, then as well as now, was that many if not most Bangladeshi Muslims are religious people and their faith is important to them.

Nor is this true only of Muslims in our country. Be they Muslim or Hindu or Christian or Buddhist -- we are by and large a religious people and our religion is an important part of how we live our lives.

This is something that we need to take into consideration when thinking about the future of religion and more importantly religion-based politics in Bangladesh.

I consider myself a staunch secularist. I am not a fan of religion-based politics, be they the politics of the religious right in the US, the

Sangh Parivar in India, the ultra-rightists in Israel, or of the Islamist parties in Bangladesh.

My sympathies are always with the secularists, as I think it is the only way for different communities to live together in harmony in a plural society.

The problem for secularists -- and not just in Bangladesh -- is that they are often thought to be anti-religion.

This is the problem the Democratic party faces in the US, and there is persuasive evidence to suggest that this perceived opposi-

tion is opposed to religion.

It should always be made clear that secularists are often people of faith themselves, and if not, then they at least respect the religious faith of others.

This last is a crucial point, because it stands in stark contrast to many fundamentalists, who evince a striking lack of respect for the religious faith, rights, and sensibilities of others. The current shameful campaign against the Ahmadiyya community is a case in point.

But I think that it would be a

consonant and their supporters in the White House.

In the context of Bangladesh, you don't have to be religious to believe that things are heading in the wrong direction, that public and private morality is at an all-time low, and that perhaps a complete cleansing of the system and a new start is the only solution.

After all, what solutions do the mainstream parties have to the wrongs and injustices that we see entrenched all around us? None that I have heard.

to this constituency today except the Islamists?

So, until the mainstream parties or liberal civil society actually comes to the table with an equally compelling vision, the fundamentalists will only get stronger.

For many Bangladeshis, if the price to pay for a functional state is that women must wear the hijab or that Friday prayers are made mandatory, that's a price well worth paying.

For me it is not. I think that the fundamentalists' explanation for

they are not considered irreligious, thereby losing the support and sympathy of the many religious people in this country who also want a tolerant and plural country.

Secularists need to point out that their vision for the future -- with education for women and full rights and opportunities for minorities -- is the more compelling one, and the one more in keeping with the founding ideals of the nation and the long-cherished values of its people.

But it is critical to understand that if the mainstream parties continue to neither listen to the people nor deliver what they want, then that space will be filled by the fundamentalists.

This is already happening to a certain extent. True the religious parties have never won too many seats in parliament, but consider the following:

Their seventeen seats in the current parliament are the most ever, and is almost 100 percent higher than their representation after the 1996 elections.

Then consider the fact that the hijab are far more in evidence today than at any time in the past.

Then consider the activities of vigilante Islamists Bangla Bhai in the North-West and the on-going campaign against the Ahmadiyyas and the steady clip of attacks on minorities.

The BNP, which has formed a coalition government with the more respectable of the Islamists, thinks it can co-opt the fundamentalists. The AL seems to think that it can just ignore them. Both are wrong. The only way to counter fundamentalists is to understand where their popularity comes from and to give people a reason to support you rather than them.

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STRAIGHT TALK

The issue isn't whether we are at heart a secular people or not, but who has a more compelling vision for the future, the secularists or the fundamentalists. If secularists want to counter the rising tide of fundamentalism, they need a vision for the future that is at least equally compelling. Secularists need to urgently address issues such as corruption and crime, such as education and opportunity for the dispossessed, such as our place in the world.

tion to religious faith on the part of the Dems is one of the factors that propelled President Bush to reelection.

Even though John Kerry is a church-going Catholic, the impression remains that if you are a religious person then the Democratic party is hostile to your faith. This is an extremely unfair perception, but one that nevertheless is quite widespread.

The perception is one that the Democratic party has to counter if it wishes to remain competitive at the national level. Simply put, if you are identified as anti-religion then you will not receive much sympathy from a lot of voters.

Similarly, in Bangladesh, secularists also need to work hard not to turn off religious voters or let the impression form that they are

worthwhile exercise to look a little more closely at the religious impulse in Bangladesh, specifically among Muslims, instead of dismissing political Islam as the ideology of fanatics and fundamentalists that has no hope of gaining popularity among the general public.

The first thing to note is that right now, with Islam perceived to be under threat around the world, many Muslims are experiencing a resurgence of faith, and feel that they must publicly identify with and rally around their besieged religion.

With the neo-colonial and neo-imperialist ambitions of the West apparently running rough-shod over the world in which their voice has been silenced to a whisper, many Muslims are going to be looking for an alternative view of the world to that espoused by the neo-

But the Islamists have a solution. They have a prescription for what needs to be done. They have a vision for the future.

They claim to be able to cleanse the system of its immorality. They profess an egalitarian vision which will offer hope and opportunity to all. They speak to and for the dispossessed. They have a strategy for Bangladesh to gain respect and recognition on the world stage.

In an ironic sense, the Islamists are the new communists. There is always going to be a strong anti-western constituency in the country that is implacably opposed to the rampant forces of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism. It used to be the communists and leftists who spoke the language of these people, but who is speaking

what is wrong in the country misses the mark and that their prescription for the future is equally flawed.

But if things continue to head in the wrong direction, if fundamental wrongs are not righted, then I could be in the minority very quickly.

The issue isn't whether we are at heart a secular people or not, but who has a more compelling vision for the future, the secularists or the fundamentalists.

If secularists want to counter the rising tide of fundamentalism, they need a vision for the future that is at least equally compelling.

Secularists need to urgently address issues such as corruption and crime, such as education and opportunity for the dispossessed, such as our place in the world.

Secularists need to ensure that

Don't teach, don't learn



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IF you know how to read and write, harrumph, harrumph, let us not fight. You know the alphabets and you know the numbers. So, I have no problem if you claim that you are an educated person. You have gone to school and you have been certified. You can think, express your mind, add, subtract, multiply and divide. My, my, you may have a chip on the shoulder, and, believe me, I don't mind.

But tell me how are you better than others, for example artists like potters, blacksmiths and archers, who use their skills in applied art? What is education if not a set of skills used in the applied art of life? Take the No Child Left Behind Act in the USA. No young man or woman in America will finish the 12th grade without rigorous training that equips them for college or the technological proficiency needed to thrive in their information-based economy.

Ahem! Education gets you equipped for life, so that you can read, write, count and speak. Perhaps you would tend to disagree on speaking, because people speak anyway, with or without education. But we are talking about sensible,

articulate speaking, quality sound bites, which shows clear thinking. No doubt, educated people have the gift of gab, although they may not mean what they say.

Ask yourself what does education mean, all that hard work, classes, homework, research, and examinations, huffing and puffing, and anxieties of failing and passing. Why have you done it, going through so much hardship and sacrifice, poring over books and notes for hours after hours, the

land and you could not keep land without power. How does that work in education? How is the pen mightier than the sword?

We have many pen pushers amongst us, who can write what they are told. Now that telling happens in two ways: direct and indirect. The direct way is when the pen writes under someone's dictate like artifacts made to order. The indirect way is when that happens under someone's influence such as ideology, belief and reasoning.

time you could spend in pursuit of leisure and pleasure?

You did it because you wanted to have education, learning skills, which would find you a job and a respectable place in the society. Was there any other reason why you did it? Perhaps to acquire knowledge, some would say. Perhaps for character formation, a fewer people would actually believe. What does it mean to have a Ph.D., or progressively lower degrees up to the other extreme?

I mean education must mean something like landholding did in the feudal days. More land was more wealth was more power. It was pretty direct, clear and reciprocal, because you could not hold power without

In fact, the pen proved to be mustier than the sword. Education teaches you to be calculating, to understand the mathematics of life, to be cautious and careful, continuously scanning the horizon for loss and gain. It makes you a milkop, your mind fermented by inordinate ambition, making you weak in your strength, ignorant in learning. If you know how to read and write you have the skills to appreciate life and your senses can be always honed to absorb more.

Nobody believes in it like the Americans do. Close to 30 percent of high school freshmen fail to graduate. More than 25 percent of the high school graduates fail to return for their sophomore year in college. The

dropout rate is twice as high in two-year institutions. More than half of the college students has serious learning problem. Surveys show that far too many newly hired employees lack the basics in reading, writing and math.

Hence, the Americans want to tweak their approach to education. So they are bringing added help -- tutoring, summer school, etc. to help those students, who might drop out of high school. They are planning to give post-graduation

sophisticated, to become eloquent, erudite and elegant. How does it happen and what does it change?

Perhaps education is comparable to ironing that stretches wrinkled clothes, or landscaping that organizes a scene. Perhaps education stretches the mind and organizes it better, thereby harnessing the energy which isn't released unless intellect and emotions are in proper harmony. Is that true for you? Do you feel it?

There is a reason why these ques-

which none of the components has been removed. A person is supposed to go the whole hog with education, and that is why anyone with a higher degree is expected to know more. You need to see the whole picture, before you can focus on a part of it. It means education is more than proficiency, which prepares you for a job.

If you can read and write, here is my question to you. Do you see the whole picture? Do you realise that you are just a drop in the ocean, an itty-bitty cog in a giant machine? Do you realise that you are just a blip on a big screen, a dot in a sea of things? If you do, then, hell, let me ask you another question. Why are you so focused on yourself, so self-centered, worried only about your own future, career, house, family, and children?

The overriding purpose of education is to integrate individuals to society, not to segregate them in their respective silos. Embrace education and you learn to read, write, count and speak as means to an end. But in reality education is end to a means. You compete in reading, writing, counting and speaking to prove that you are better than others. It is no longer important who learns what. Education is more a showdown of who can teach whom.

As a result, when the minister steps out of an unauthorised car and the musclemans steps into a luxury one, the pen looks as good as the sword. One uses the pen, another uses the sword, and ultimately they use each other. If you are an educated person, don't teach, don't learn. Just show me how can I tell the difference between them.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

Let us face it, most of what you learn doesn't apply. But still you learn them because the idea of education is like whole milk from which none of the components has been removed. A person is supposed to go the whole hog with education, and that is why anyone with a higher degree is expected to know more. You need to see the whole picture, before you can focus on a part of it.

technical training to those who need an extra help to meet industry proficiency standards in technical fields. They are extrapolating education, fixing the means to fix the end.

Now that is an example only that people can be products of their education. In other words, what people learn has some kind of an influence on them, moulding their minds, attitudes, personalities and behaviours. What do you say? Do you feel that transformation inside you? Do you think education has got the best or the worst out of you?

Surely, education gives you proficiency that makes you more efficient. It teaches you to present yourself in a more rational manner, to sell yourself better, to sound more

are relevant. Education doesn't give what it once promised, the enlightenment, the recognition, the aura, and the auspices of good life. You can still find a job if you go to school. You can read, write and count. You can fill out an application, sign a document and write a check. But how much education do you need for these? What do you do with the surplus knowledge, the excess skill, which doesn't have any practical use? The skill to write this column, for example? Knowledge of philosophy, history, archaeology, and language?

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OPINION

The caretaker system and necessity for reform

MD MOSHARRAF ULLAH

THE write-ups regarding the caretaker government as published in The Daily Star by Mr. S. A. M. S. Kibria and Justice Latifur Rahman, the former Chief Justice and the Chief Advisor of the Caretaker Govt in 2001, have given an opportunity to the enlightened public to discuss and suggest remedial measures to improve the system. People by and large should see to the problem facing the country and find out a solution. Both the government and opposition parties are hell-bound to stick to their points of view. It is indeed very interesting for the people to see that the Awami League, which was the proponent of the system and was its first beneficiary, is dead now against the system. The BNP, which was a reluctant midwife to the system, now do not see the necessity for any change in it. The ruling party, whether the BNP or the Awami League have lost the credibility of holding any free and fair election under it. And hence the necessity of the caretaker government.

The election is conducted by the Election Commission with the assistance of the government functionaries, who are neutral under the caretaker government, while they are under pressure under party governments. The Election Commission and party government cannot see eye to eye and the latter do not help the former in the conduct of elections. The case is otherwise under the caretaker government. So, side by side with bringing about any change in the caretaker government, necessary reforms in the Election Commission are a sine qua non. The Commission should be independent in all spheres of its activities and should have its own officers to conduct elections, instead of depending on government functionaries. So long as that is not done, the judicial officers of the separate Judiciary, may replace the government functionaries.

The reform of the Election Commission should be done simultaneously with the democratisation of the political parties. If there is no democracy in the political parties, how can they claim for democracy in

the country? "Heal thyself first," should be the motto. From the prevalent political scenario in the country, the people cannot expect anything tangible. Both the mainstreams, which also include Jatiya Party and Jamaat, have nothing to offer to the people for a bright future. They are the two sides of the same coin and do the same thing, while in power or in opposition. The people of the country are earnestly waiting for alternative "streams" to rescue them from the political quagmire of the mainstreams.

Justice Latifur Rahman was after the choice of the Awami League. But he acted quite neutrally in conducting the business of the government. His Council of Advisors incidentally included two nominees of the Awami League. The rest were of his choice, or included some nominees of the BNP. The Administration of the caretaker government had to undo some of the partisan postings in the Administration by the Awami League in its last days in office. The much talked about transfer of some 13 Secretaries from their posts was done to make the administration

neutral. These officers were thought to have been posted by the Awami League to serve its purpose in the election. All the apparently pro-Awami League officers at the District and Upazila levels were withdrawn and new officers were posted in their places. The cases of the then Principal Secretary and Establishment Secretary are instances in point. The former was well known to be pro-Awami League while in office. He declared that he would retire on time and would not accept any contractual appointment. But he was appointed on contract and gladly continued as the Principal Secretary. Was there any other alternative to the neutral government but to transfer him? The post of the Establishment Secretary was filled up by a junior officer, who was promoted as an Additional Secretary, much ahead of his senior batch-mates. He was said to be a close relative of the then Prime Minister. What would have been the role of the partisan secretary, who was in charge of transfer and posting of all level of officers in the cadre services under the Establishment

Ministry? We should not behave like a one-eyed stag in passing our judgement against anybody.

The Election Commission was also not spared. The Chief Election Commissioner was appointed by them. So, was Mr. M. Saifur Rahman of Janata Mancha fame. To crown them all two retired District Judges were appointed as Election Commissioners, the posts supposed to be filled up by Justices of the High Court. What might have been the purposes to be served by all these? However, these gentlemen played their roles neutrally, thanks to them all.

The vast majority of the people are not either with the Awami League or the BNP permanently. They cast their votes according to their free choice. They elect a party whom they think to be fit for running the affairs of the government. They swing like a pendulum, to either of the parties. Both the parties may each have 25 per cent of the voters as their vote banks, but the remaining 50 per cent of the voters are neutral and they cast their votes on merit. If these 50 per cent of the voters do not choose either of the

political parties, these 25 per cent vote banks will not count a fig. There may be an alternative thinking and swing in that way. So, they should rectify their mistakes of the past. The vast majority of the teeming million are not with them permanently and any kind of coalition cannot guarantee for keeping them in power or help them sit in the seat of power.

At present there is a silent murmuring going on in the country for a wholesale change, not this way or that, for a better and brighter future. This may not be a choice between the BNP-led or Awami League-led coalitions. People cannot be treated as a flock of sheep to jump with this or that combine.

After the election was over the Awami League began criticising the caretaker government by pronouncing that it was given an *amanat*, but it failed to return it to them. This does not speak well of political leaders regarding verdict of the people. They have not developed the mentality of accepting defeat in an election in good grace and expect that the verdict will always be in their favour. The country is not a fiefdom of either of the two parties and they should not

rest assured of returning to power continuously. The people should have multiple choices to elect their lawmakers to form the government after a fixed time.

Justice Latifur Rahman proved himself truly neutral, like his predecessors, in running the affairs of the government and holding the election in a free and fair manner. He had to undo the misdeeds of the Awami League government by reposting the officers of their liking and bringing about neutral machinery to conduct the election.

It seems the caretaker government was introduced in a hurry by the party that did not believe in its concept on demand of another party which was not consulted in its introduction. Things done in haste are never done right. So there are scopes for its reform. All political parties should now ponder about how to bring about changes in the system. It is an uphill task and should be taken in right earnest by all well-meaning people of the country.

We may consider change in appointing as Chief Advisor by the President, not only the last retiring Chief Justice alone, but also from

among all the former Chief Justices to be acceptable to the political parties. The President may choose the Chief Advisor by consulting the political parties. We must discard the distrust and malice among the political parties. They must not also think themselves as the sole depository of the trust of the people. And they must not take their opponents as enemies. They should look beyond and see that the erstwhile enemies, India and Pakistan, are ready to talk to each other and trying to improve their relations. This will lead to improvement of millions of people in both countries. Can't we take a lesson from them and bury the hatchet and try to improve the lot of our own people? Let good sense, and not rancour, prevail in our political arena.

The political parties should not consider themselves as rulers of the people, but as servants of the people. Hence, there is the need for consensus among them for change in the caretaker system.

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