

Lailat-ul-Qadr

SYED ASHRAF ALI

It was on the auspicious Lailat-ul-Qadr, the Night of Power or the Night of Honour or Majesty that the Holy Quran, the most blessed and perfect of all revelations, was vouchsafed to the benighted world. By revelation, of course, is meant first revelation because the Holy Quran was revealed in portions during a total period of twenty-three years. It was this blessed Night of Majesty which first witnessed the shining of the Divine Light which was destined to illumine the whole universe.

Lailat-ul-Qadr occupies a unique position in the Islamic calendar. The word 'Lailat' in Arabic means Night and 'Qadr' stands for Power or Honour or Majesty. The real merit of this glorious Night has been clearly expounded in the Holy Quran. Allah has emphatically and in unambiguous terms declared in Sura Qadr:

"We have indeed revealed this (Message) in the Night of Power.

And what will explain to thee what the Night of Power is?

The Night of Power is better than a thousand months." (97:1-2)

The glorious Night of grandeur or greatness, better than a thousand months is indeed a Night of great wonders and divine blessings wherein, as the Holy Quran declares, "come down the angels and the Spirit by Allah's permission, on every errand." (97:4)

Nobody knows exactly in which particular night in the holy month of Ramadan did the great "Revelation come down to the benighted world, transformed the conflict of wrong-doing into Peace and Harmony through the agency of the angelic host, representing the spiritual powers of the Mercy of Allah." Although it has been clearly laid down in Sura Baqara: "Ramadan is the month in which was sent down the Quran, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgement, between right wrong." (2:185) we have been left just a little to chances and nobody knows definitely which particular Night is the auspicious Night of Power or the Night of Honour. The precise date of Lailat-ul-Qadr is said to have been known to the holy Prophet (pbuh) and a few of the Companions. Literalists sometimes refer to some particular Night in the calendar, but there is no agreement or consensus as to which it is. The Divine Night has been variously fixed as the 12th, 21st, 23rd, 25th, 27th or the 29th night of Ramadan, or more probably one of the last three nights mentioned above. Even some other nights in the month of Ramadan are claimed to be Lailat-ul-Qadr. But it is generally supposed to be a Night occurring on any night in the last third portion of Ramadan.

Hazrat Ayesha (RA) reported God's Messenger as saying, "Seek Lailat-ul-Qadr on an odd number night among the last ten in Ramadan." (Bukhari)

Ibn Umar (RA) said that some of the Prophet's Companions had a dream that Lailat-ul-Qadr was among the last seven nights, so the Apostle of Allah. (pbuh) said, "I see that your dreams agree regarding the last seven night, so if anyone asks it he should do so during the last seven night." (Bukhari and Muslim).

Ibn Abbas (RA) reported the Holy

Prophet (pbuh) as saying, "Seek Lailat-ul-Qadr in the last ten nights of Ramadan, on the twenty-first, twenty-third and twenty-fifth." (Bukhari).

Abu Said al-Khudri said; God's Messenger (pbuh) spent the first ten nights of Ramadan in devotion, and spent the middle ten nights in a round Turkish tent, after which he raised his head and said: "I have spent the first ten nights in devotion seeking this Night, then I spent the middle ten nights in devotion, and after that I had a heavenly visitant and was told that it is in the last ten, so he who has engaged in devotion along with me should do so during the last ten nights, for I was shown this Night, then was caused to forget it, but I have been myself prostrating in water and clay on the morning following, so seek it among the last ten and seek it in every night with an odd number." He said: Rain fell that night "the mosque which was a thatched building dripped, and my eyes saw God's Messenger (pbuh) with traces of water and clay, on his forehead on the morning after the twenty-first night." Bukhari and Muslim agree on the subject matter,

It is not the worldly pleasures and physical comforts that one should ask for on this holy Night. What a man should pray for in this blessed Night is Forgiveness and Allah's Forgiveness alone. Nothing can be more pleasant, nothing can be more beneficial, nothing can be sweeter than the glorious Mercy of the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah.

the wording being Muslim's up to "and was told it is in the last ten," the remainder being Bukhari's. In the version of Abdullah bin Unais (RA), he said it was the twenty-third night. Muslim transmitted it.

According to Ibn Hanbal, a Hadith narrated by Ibn Umar (RA) claimed that the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Whoever seeks the Night, let him seek it on the 27th." It is not perhaps necessary to fix the Night literally by the calendar. The Night on which Divine Message descends from Allah is undoubtedly a blessed Night for mankind, like a much-awaited day of rain for a parched land. It is for this that the I'tikaf, the adhering to the mosques or retiring for contemplation during Ramadan as a form of devotion or meditation, is fixed for the last ten days of the month of Ramadan. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) himself used to spend the last ten days of Ramadan in complete retirement in the mosque. He even had his bed placed in the mosque behind a pillar during I'tikaf.

Hazrat Ayesha (RA) said that God's Messenger (pbuh) used to exert himself in devotion during the last ten nights to a greater extent than at any other time. (Muslim transmitted it).

She said that when the last ten nights began Allah's Apostle (pbuh) prepared himself for religious exercises, stayed awake at night and wakened his family. (Bukhari and Muslim).

"A thousand months" may also be taken in a mystic or indefinite sense as denoting a very long period of time. It is not necessarily 83 years and 4 months. It may not even refer to

ordinary human conception of time. On the contrary, it might very well refer to "timeless Time". In the words of Abdulla Yusuf Ali, "A thousand" must be taken in an indefinite sense as denoting very long period of time. This does not refer to our ideas of time, to "timeless Time". "It transcends Time; for it is God's power dispelling the Darkness of Ignorance, by His Revelation in every kind of affair. One moment of enlightenment under God's Light is better than thousands of months or years of animal life, and such a moment converts the night of darkness into a period of spiritual glory." The Holy Quran : Text (Abdulla Yusuf Ali, Translation and Commentary, Lahore, 1938, p. 1765).

Lailat-ul-Qadr, popularly known as Shab-e-Qadr in this continent, indeed occupies a very important place in the life of a devoted Muslim. "The descent of the angels and the Spirit by Allah's permission" also testifies to the deeper significance and religious sanctity of the auspicious Night, for though a particular Night in the month of Ramadan may be character-

ised by great Divine Blessings, it is more especially in connection with the mission of one appointed by Allah for the regeneration of the world that "the angels and the Spirit" come down from heaven, such being the Divine support of his cause.

Sura Qadr, testifying so eloquently to the divine grandeur and unique greatness of the majestic Lailat-ul-Qadr, ends with the beautiful expression: "Peace! This until the rise of morn!"

"Peace" indeed is the chief distinction of Lailat-ul-Qadr. This "Peace" comes to the hearts of the devotees in the form of a tranquillity of mind which makes them fit to receive Divine blessings. When the night of spiritual darkness is dissipated by the Glory of Benign Providence, a wonderful peace and a sense of security arise in the soul. All jars are stilled in the reign supreme of peace. "And this lasts on", in the words of Allama Abdullah Yusuf Ali. "Until this life closes, and the glorious Day of the new spiritual world dawns, when everything will be on a different plane, and the chequered nights and days of the world will be even less than a dream." The continuance of the blessed Night till "the rise of Morn" is quite clear and evident when the Night is taken literally; the work of morning signifying, "the approaching end of the reforms, when truth, like the light of the day, has made itself fully manifest." In the words of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, "the mortal night gives place to the glorious day of an immortal world." (Abdullah Yusuf Ali, ibid, p. 1764).

Lailat-ul-Qadr, the blessed Night in which thirteen hundred and ninety two years ago the Great Revelation of

the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah "broke through the darkness of the human soul" and the Holy Quran, the perfect code of human life, reached mankind as Message of "Mercy from the Lord", carries another significance of Divine Excellence. As Moulvi Mohammed Ali states: "The time during which a Prophet appears is usually a time of darkness and as such is often compared to night in the Holy Quran. But as in this darkness comes a blessing from on high in the person of a Divine Messenger, the Night is a blessed and majestic Night. Hence the period of the advent of a Divine Messenger may also be metaphorically called Lailat-ul-Qadr. Its designation as the Blessed Night in Sura Ad-Dukhan followed as it is by the statement that in it 'every wise affair is made distinct', shows clearly that the other significance of the world is based on the Holy Quran itself, because it is during the time of a Prophet's advent that true wisdom is distinctly established."

Blessed indeed is this Night of Power! "The excellencies of the Lailat-ul-Qadr are said to be innumerable, and it is believed that during its solemn hours the whole animal and vegetable creation, bow down in humble adoration to the Almighty, (Dictionary of Islam, 1988 edition, Pp. 282-283). The divine importance of this Night of Grandeur is so great that the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) himself declared, "He who spends the Lailat-ul-Qadr, through prayers in full faith, shall have all his previous sins and guilt forgiven." As none can afford to miss this glorious and unique opportunity, Muslims all over the world eagerly await this auspicious Night and try their level best to pass this Night through prayers, Quranic recitations and deep meditation with all the possible sincerity and devotion. As this Night provides them with the coveted opportunity to receive Allah's blessings, Muslims in every nook and corner of the world rise to the occasion to avail this glorious opportunity and pray with a sincere and cherished hope to be blessed with Allah's forgiveness and Mercy. It is this Mercy of Allah which breaks through the darkness of the human soul on this blessed night. "All the powers, of the world divine, speed on their mystic Message of Mercy, by Allah's Command, and bless every nook and corner of the heart."

But it is not the worldly pleasures and physical comforts that one should ask for on this holy Night. What a man should pray for in this blessed Night is Forgiveness and Allah's Forgiveness alone. Nothing can be more pleasant, nothing can be more beneficial, nothing can be sweeter than the glorious Mercy of the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah.

Hazrat Ayesha Siddiqua (RA) said: "I asked the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) what to say on Lailat-ul-Qadr on the assumption that I knew it was the Night."

The holy Prophet (peace be upon him) replied, "One should say: Oh Lord! Thou art forgiving and Lovest forgiveness, so forgive me." (Ahmed, Ibn Majah and Tirmizi)

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Challenges for the Saarc leaders

A.TARIQ KARIM

THE next Saarc summit is to be held in Dhaka this November, when the rotating chair of the organization will pass to Bangladesh. This year also happens to mark the 20th anniversary of Saarc's founding.

Considering that Bangladesh was the originator of the Saarc concept that led to the first ever summit of the seven Saarc countries being held in Dhaka in 1985 to establish the organization, it would be entirely appropriate now for Bangladesh, in 2005, to take the lead in nudging the Saarc countries to think out of the box and prepare an appropriate proposal for consideration by the global dialogue envisioned at Gleneagles for later this year, that would also tie in with the Gleneagles G-8's other major pre-occupations -- ending poverty now and combating terrorism.

Our policymakers would, first and foremost, have to open the windows of their closed minds, look beyond the pale of their own noses and take a more holistic view of approaching solutions to the region's myriad problems of poverty, development, disaster management, and environmental, ecological economic and, indeed, overall regional security.

The floods last year that ravaged the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal sub-region within Saarc simultaneously were the worst in several decades. The losses were colossal, particularly in the lower plains areas. With an overactive monsoon season also expected this year, the region as a whole will have to brace itself for further disasters. The only way that these floods can be managed (they cannot be entirely prevented) is if the countries involved were to undertake, whether in the eastern or western sectors of the Saarc region, simultaneously and in a coordinated manner,

activities for training and constructing protective embankments along the major river systems that flow across the sub-regions, holistically from the headwaters to the mouth of these rivers. (Indeed, this is the important lesson to be gleaned from the Chinese experience in training the Yellow River in China -- historically also known as the river of sorrows, before it was trained and tamed).

This would entail massive employment of human capital along the

the sub-region. However, construction of small barrages cascading along the course of the rivers would effectively disperse such risks while accruing for the peoples along the route obvious benefits. Studies should be undertaken quantifying how many households in how many villages in which areas would be beneficiaries of the activities and power so generated, how much land could be saved or made more productive, what local businesses and services could be

Training of the rivers and harnessing their current-flows to generate clean and renewable energy ad infinitum, would transform the lives of the peoples of the region. They would put a stop to continuing deforestation (for fuel as well as for illegal logging) and enable reforestation of already denuded areas and even expanding new areas of forestation, and also ensure that large chunks of the river banks are not washed away from uncontrolled floods.

entire passage of the river, from the headwaters to the mouths, resulting in vast and widespread employment creation (and consequently local wealth generation).

Along with training these rivers could be undertaken expansion of existing networks of irrigation channels, and construction of water conservation reservoirs in the form of small barrages for management of waters and generation of hydro-electricity using new and the best available technology for harnessing the river flows.

Construction of mega dams is no more an attractive proposition, not only because of the potential social consequences but also because of the risks involved in activating the fault-lines along existing tectonic plates of

generated, and how much more local wealth would be added in the process.

All these activities would have direct or indirect beneficial economic effects not only for the peoples of the sub-region within the Saarc region where they are undertaken, but for the larger South Asian region and globally as well. The creation of employment would be bound to generate multiplier effects, with positive implications for promoting development and enhancing overall security. Training of the rivers and harnessing their current-flows to generate clean and renewable energy ad infinitum, would transform the lives of the peoples of the region. They would put a stop to continuing deforestation (for fuel as well as for illegal logging) and enable



A hydel power project.

Sir Roger Bannister's race against time

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

IN October, sports network ESPN aired a film on Roger Bannister's history-making first sub-four minute mile in May 1954. The television movie was refreshing in so many ways. Bannister was an amateur. A full-time medical student, Bannister did sports on the side. In the beginning, he had no coach; he did not even warm up before a race! On that fateful day, May 6, 1954, Bannister completed his rounds at St. Mary's hospital in London (he wanted the day to be "normal"), sharpened the spikes on his running shoes on the hospital grindstone himself, took a train to Oxford seventy miles away and to his dismay found the conditions blustery and the cinder track rain-soaked. "Under these conditions, I have to run 3:57 to break the 4-minute barrier," he lamented.

Contrast Roger Bannister with our modern day sports heroes. Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson was disqualified and stripped off his 100-meters Olympic gold medal at the 1988 Seoul Olympics after testing positive for a banned performance-enhancing substance. These days, lanky singles-hitting baseball players suddenly bulk up, and with muscles bursting out of biceps start hitting home runs! If caught, their innocent answer is: "I did not know the substance I was using (as a performance-enhancer) was banned!"

In the world of track and field, in all probability the first drug abusers were Russian sisters, Tamara Press (shot putter) and Irena Press (100 metre hurdler) in the 1960s, and the East German swimmers (such as Kornelia Anders) in the 1970s. The drug detection technology was not advanced enough to catch the cheaters, who also used masking substances to make detection almost impossible. One hint

was that all these females spoke with a man-like baritone. When this was pointed out to the East German swimming coach at the Montreal Olympics of 1976, he famously replied, "They are swimmers, not singers!"

By contrast, sports was squeaky clean during Roger Bannister's time. By 1954, it was generally acknowledged that only two barriers remained for human beings to conquer: Mount Everest and the 4-minute mile. New Zealander Edmund Hillary, along with Nepalese Sherpa Tenzing, had just conquered Mount Everest. With laconic New Zealand humour, this is how Hillary had informed the world of his conquest: "We knocked off the bastard!" That rather Spartan summation became Bannister's inspiration as he approached his moment in history.

There was a widespread belief in 1954 that the human heart and lung could not withstand a sub 4-minute mile run, and that the run would kill the person attempting it! That Swede Gunder Haegg's 1945 record (4:01.4) stood for nine years lent credence to the theory. Besides, Roger Bannister was not necessarily the favourite to go sub-four minutes first. After all, Bannister had miserably failed to win any medal in the 1952 Helsinki Olympics 1500 meters run. Australian John Landy and the American Wes Santee were considered the more likely duo. Both were running fast. After his college recessed for summer, Santee was planning on attempting the sub-four minute mile on the fast tracks of California. Landy, too, was headed west; his tryst with destiny was to be on the fast track of the Helsinki Olympics. Twenty-five year old Roger Bannister had little time to waste. Unlike other runners, however, Bannister trained aerobically on a treadmill and weight-trained to build up his muscles.

Because Landy and Santee could attempt the sub-four minute mile any

LETTER FROM AMERICA

The mystique of Roger Bannister and the first sub-four minute mile persist. (Roger Bannister is now Sir Roger Bannister; the Queen knighted him in 1975). Sir Roger broke the Barrier. Everyone follows in his wake. Even to this day, the first question serious middle distance runners ask each other is: "Have you run under 4 minutes?" Runners are still judged by the gold standard that the 25-year old Oxford graduate set in 1954.



day, Bannister did not have the luxury of postponing his own attempt at the Iliffe Road track of Oxford University. He was lucky. Bannister's pacemakers were his friends, fellow Olympians, medalists and world class runners

Christopher Brasher (3000 metre steeple chase) and Christopher Chataway (5000 metres). With Hillary's "Let's knock off the bastard" as the pep rally, the three friends' rendezvous with destiny was underway.

At the gun, fired around 6 pm, Brasher went right for the lead, as planned, and Bannister settled comfortably behind him. Ignoring Bannister's plea to go faster, Brasher took the field through the first lap in

57.5 seconds. Perfect! The two-lap, half way split was 1:58. Perfect, again! Chataway took over at the beginning of the third lap, and with the crowd of 1000 cheering wildly, led Bannister through the three quarter mile in 3:00.7.

Not so perfect! This meant that a tiring Bannister had to cover the last quarter mile in less than 59.3 seconds. It was Bannister's race against time now. On the backstretch, Bannister swept by Chataway and accelerated into the cool, damp evening. "I felt at that moment that it was my chance to do something supremely well," Bannister wrote in "First Four Minutes," his autobiography. He knew that the whole world was waiting for him behind the tape. After bursting through the finish line, Bannister collapsed into the arms of the track officials. "I felt like an exploded flashlight," he recalled.

It was so close that no one knew whether the barrier had been broken. As each timers' time was being tabulated, the crowd awaited the time with expectation and apprehension in pin drop silence. Bannister's roommate and friend at Exeter College, Oxford, Norris McWhirter (one of the brewery Guinnesses, who co-founded the Guinness Book of (World) Records in 1955 and died last year) was the announcer at the meet. McWhirter announced: "Ladies and gentleman, here is the result of event No. 9, the one-mile. First, No. 41, R. G. Bannister of the Amateur Athletic Association and formerly of Exeter and Merton Colleges, with a time which is a new meeting and track record, and which, subject to ratification, will be a new English native, British national, British all-comers, European, British Empire, and world record. The time is three minutes. . . ." And the crowd's roar drowned the rest of McWhirter's announcements. For the record, Bannister ran the last quarter in 58.7 seconds and his mile time was 3 minutes and 59.4 seconds.

Six weeks later, John Landy broke Bannister's record (3:58.0). A few months later, in the Mile of the Century, Bannister beat his bitter rival John

Landy (3:58.8), at the Commonwealth Games in Vancouver, Canada. After winning a European gold medal in the 1500 meters the same year, Bannister quietly retired from track to become a physician and researcher. American Wes Santee was so devastated by being beaten to the first sub-four minute mile by Bannister that he quit track without ever running a sub-four minute mile. To this day, John Landy, the gentle Australian, regrets not having run the first sub-four minute mile.

Since Roger Bannister's unprecedented feat in 1954, over 955 runners have gone under four minutes over 4,700 times. Among those runners are fathers and sons, and brothers. Former mile record holder and 1976 Montreal Olympic gold medalist in the 1500 meters, John Walker of New Zealand, has run under 4-minutes over 100 times! Fourteen world record holders have set nineteen records in the sub-four minute mile. If the current world mile record holder, Hicham el-Guerrouj of Morocco (gold medalist in the 1500 and 5000 meter races in the 2000 Athens Olympics), were to have raced Roger Bannister of May 6, 1954, Hicham el-Guerrouj (3:43.13) would have beaten Roger Bannister by 120 yards!

Yet, the mystique of Roger Bannister and the first sub-four minute mile persist. (Roger Bannister is now Sir Roger Bannister; the Queen knighted him in 1975). Sir Roger broke the Barrier. Everyone follows in his wake. During the writer's days at Oxford in the 1970s, he could not believe that he was running on the same hallowed Oxford University track at Iliffe Road that Sir Roger Bannister had immortalised! Even to this day, the first question serious middle distance runners ask each other is: "Have you run under 4 minutes?" Runners are still judged by the gold standard that the 25-year old Oxford graduate set in 1954.

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