

The significance of Hajj

Imam Ghazzali (RA) has beautifully interpreted the spiritual meaning of the Hajj as a whole and in its individual phases. According to the great theologian, as narrated by G.E Von Grunebaum: "The first requirement for the pilgrim is to understand what the Hajj means within religion as whole. There is no access to Allah except through self-abnegation. For these reasons, the religions of earlier faiths withdrew from the world."

SYED ASHRAF ALI

THE Holy Makkah and its black-robed Ka'ba command the hearts of more than a billion Muslims all over the world. Wherever they are, the faithful turn towards the holy Shrine five times each day in prayer, and the centre-piece of the Muslim World, the Sacred Mosque at Makkah, throbs with life and exuberant piety at the height of the Hajj season in this auspicious month of Zilhaj.

"Caught up in the whirling scene," describes Thomas Abercrombie in The Sword and the Sermon, "millions of pilgrims orbit God's House in accord with the atoms, in harmony with planets. And at the ritual climaxing the pilgrimage, the sacred plain of Arafat once again blooms majestically with believers as the multitude halts and bows toward the Holy Makkah for the (combined) midday and afternoon prayers, testifying so eloquently to the eternal truth of Allah's kind assurance given to the Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh): "Proclaim the pilgrimage among men. I will make sure the call reaches whoever I wish, though I call at the ends of the earth."

Hajj is the fifth of the five Arkan, or "pillars" of Islam. Hajj literally means "setting out," "tending towards," "to go round." The pilgrimage to Makkah on the appointed days in the month of Zilhaj, the twelfth month in the

Islamic calendar, is known as Hajj. According to the Islamic law, it comprises acts like compassing the sacred territory, or going round the Ka'ba (Tawaf) in a particular period, stay or halt (Wukuf) in the plain of Arafat, running between as-Safa and al-Marwah hills, casting pebbles at Mina, etc. The Holy Quran declares that Ka'ba at Bakkah (Makkah), known as Baitullah (the house of Allah), was "the first house of worship appointed for men" (3:98).

The Prophets Abraham and Isma'il (Peace be upon them) "raised the foundation of the House" (2:217). Allah instructed Abraham to "sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or stand up, or bow, or prostrate themselves (therein in prayer). And proclaim the pilgrimage among men; they will come to thee on foot and (mounted) on every kind of camel, lean on account of journeys through deep and distant mountain highways."

In accordance with this divine ordinance, Abraham introduced Hajj centred on the holy Ka'ba. In response to his clarion call, people started gathering in Makkah to perform Hajj every year. But gradually, this centre of Tawhid (or the Oneness of Allah) was turned into a place of idolatry, and 360 idols were placed therein.

Many other indecent and illegal practices were also followed. For example:

- Changing of the lunar months

whimsically to make the prohibited (Haram) months (2:217) lawful (Halal), and lengthen the duration of some years to 13 months instead of the usual twelve through the Nasi system (9:36). As a result, the Hajj in the year 9 A. H (631 A.D) was celebrated in the month of Zilqad and not Zilhaj.

- All the pagan Arabs, excepting the Quraish, male and female alike, used to circumambulate the Ka'ba naked. Due to such reasons, the Holy Prophet (pbuh) did not perform the pilgrimage in the 9th Hegira (Shibl Numani Sirat-un-Nabi, 2:124). A caravan of 300 Muslims under the leadership of Abu Bakr was sent for Hajj that year.

- While it was on the way, Ali b. Abu Talib was commissioned by the Holy Prophet (pbuh) as Naqib to read out to the pilgrims that i) the performance of the Pilgrimage would after that year be forbidden to unbelievers (except those with whom the Holy Prophet (pbuh) had made special treaties), and ii) no one henceforth be allowed to go round the Ka'ba naked.

- In pagan times, the pilgrims used to gather in assemblies in which the praises of their ancestors were sung. It was revealed: "So when ye have accomplished your holy rites, celebrate the praises of God, as ye used to celebrate the praises of your

fathers -- yea, with far more heart and soul." (2:200).

- The people of Yathrib (Medina) used to worship the goddess Manat and did not go to the two hills of as-Safa and al-Marwa, although it had always been considered an integral part of the Pilgrimage in memory of the Prophet Isma'il (pbuh) and his mother Hagera (Hajar). The gross superstitious rites of the pagan Arabs caused offence to the early Muslims and they felt some hesitation in going round these places during the Pilgrimage. Allah, therefore, ordains in the holy Quran: "Safa and Marwa are among the Symbols of God, so if those who visit the House in Season or at other times, should compass them round, it is no sin in them." (2:158).

- The Quraish also used to fight shy of the Wukuf (the halt) at the plain of Arafat, although this too had always been an essential part of the Pilgrimage.

In 10. A. H (632 A.D) the Holy Prophet (SM) himself led the Hajj. This historic Hajj, held in the month of Zilhaj, is popularly known as "the Farewell Pilgrimage" (Hajjatu'l Wada) and taken as the model of an ideal Hajj. The way the Hajj is to be performed was very clearly demonstrated by the Holy Prophet during this Pilgrimage, and a number of days in the month of Zilhaj were earmarked for the performance of Hajj.

From this year, the ecclesiastical year was also definitely fixed as a purely lunar year of roughly 354 days, the months being calculated by the actual appearance of the moon, and the hitherto practised wrong system of adding or deducting

months was abolished for good. Imam Ghazzali (RA) has beautifully interpreted the spiritual meaning of the Hajj as a whole and in its individual phases. According to the great theologian, as narrated by G.E Von Grunebaum: "The first requirement for the pilgrim is to understand what the Hajj means within religion as whole. There is no access to Allah except through self-abnegation. For these reasons, the religions of earlier faiths withdrew from the world."

For these reasons, the religions of earlier faiths withdrew from the world. When this tendency weakened, Muhammad (pbuh) was sent to revive the tradition; but as the Prophet explained, in exchange for monasticism the Lord gave the Muslims Holy War and the Pilgrimage.

As the believer will some day meet God in a garment he does not wear in this life, that is, the shroud, so the pilgrim goes to the House in an unusual garment -- the Ihram. Both are alike in that they are unsown.

On the journey the pilgrim should hope for acceptance, not in the virtue of his own acts, but trusting in God's Grace and fulfilment of His promise. The Talibiyah is the answer to God's summons, and should remind the faithful of the response of the people to the Trumpet on the Day of Resurrection, when they will rise from their graves and assemble in uncertainty about their ultimate fate.

Upon entering the Holiday Territory, the pilgrim should hope both for safety from punishment and from the fear that he might be considered unworthy of the Lord's proximity, but hope should be stronger than fear.

"In Arafat, the crowds, the shout-



ing, the many tongues, the grouping of the nations by their leaders should remind you of the Plains of the Last Day when the nations will assemble around their prophets, fearful and perplexed. Be humble, but hopeful. When all unite their earnings, do not think God will disappoint them. It has been said that to 'stand' in Arafah and not to believe that God has forgiven you is a very great sin. When you throw the pebbles, be motivated by obedience only, try to be as Abraham was when the Devil appeared to him to inject doubt in his heart and induce him to rebel, and Abraham stoned the Devil at God's behest.

Should you think that Abraham was faced by Satan, and you are not -- know that this very thought is given you by Satan who wants you to think the pebbles to be a meaningless play. Outwardly, you are casting pebbles at the "Agaba," but in reality you are smiting Satan by your increased obedience to God's Command. Realise, finally that sacrifice will draw you near to Him in virtue of your obedience. Be hopeful that for each limb of the victim God will free one of your limbs from the fire."

"When the Hajj is duly completed," said Imam Ghazzali (RA), "fear must lodge in the pilgrim's

heart, for he does not know whether his Hajj has been accepted or not. But he will obtain certainty from his heart and his own actions. For, if he finds himself moving away from delusion and doing right in the light of the Law, he may be sure of acceptance. For God accepts only those whom He loves, and whom He loves He befriends openly and manifests in him the effects of His love, keeping them from Satan's assaults. May Allah, in His infinite Mercy, protect us from having our Pilgrimage rejected."

Syed Ashraf Ali is former Director-General, Islamic Foundation.

Guns in America again (and again)

Nothing has changed. It's always shoot-to-kill time in America, the rite of manhood in a country led by neo-cons, right-wingers, and lying conservatives. And once again, to the amazement of people in the rest of the world, America attacked itself, elevated home-grown terrorism into a five-minute talk-show debate about what's wrong with the country.

CHARLES LARSON

IT'S open hunting season in the United States again. This week's carnage: Eight people slain by a gunman at a shopping mall in Omaha, several others at two churches in Colorado. What will be the country's reaction? Business as usual. Collective amnesia.

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American -- millions of them -- believe that it is the right of every American to kill another American. As a survivor of the Holocaust said of her life in the United States many years ago, "America is a wonderful country filled with many sick people."

I have to confess that as an American I'm ashamed of my country -- still again -- and I've spent too much of my adult life being ashamed: Kennedy's assassination,

I'll provide two easy answers: TV and the internet. First it was TV, addicting Americans to a fourth of each of their days, filling them with mindless babble and hooking them on to serial stories of money, sex, intrigue, and murder.

Unfortunately, the effect of TV lasted close to half a century, and, although it still consumes the average American for many hours each day, the internet has now begun a similar takeover of their minds. If

Worse, if one really needs to protect one's self against others, then a rifle or a revolver is basically useless. No better reason for the justification of semi-automatics or AK rifles. (You might actually want to shoot several members of your family members clearly defies sanity by any measure in the world).

Moreover, psychiatry has had an explanation for gun-toting American for decades. A man needs a gun, just as he needs his penis. Take his gun away and you castrate him.

Thus, we arrive at the twisted place where we are today, where no politician will stand up to the right-wingers and the National Rifle Association but will, instead, attempt to pander to them. I once heard one of our celebrated Republican pundits respond to a question about guns by stating that if criminals want to kill, then they'll use anything at their disposal. Ergo, why ban guns?

No one had the sense to ask him that if the criminal only had a knife, how many people could he murder? If the deranged student at Virginia Tech had had a knife, would he have been able to murder 32 people?

So what will it take to change America's fixation on guns? Well, more than the latest victims shot in a mall. If the killer had shot eight congressmen or senators in the same amount of time, would the survivors have been able to draw any other conclusion from such a dastardly act? Would their answers have been, "If everyone in the senate and congress had carried a gun, this wouldn't have happened?" With the leaders we have in America today, it's hard to draw any other conclusion.

Why not issue guns to newborns as soon as they leave the hospital?

Vietnam, Richard Nixon, Martin Luther King's assassination, George Bush and the current war in Iraq.

Events within the United States constantly strain the credibility of any informed person, yet I would be the first to admit that most Americans choose to stay uninformed about what is going on in the world and in their country -- until an incident like the latest shootings dominates the media for a few hours until the next revelation about some celebrity distracts them from any responsible thinking.

Just as in the case of Virginia Tech earlier this year, the latest rampage gave America five minutes of soul-searching before the country returned to its usual concerns: local sports, the weather, Anna Nicole Smith, and schlock-jockbabbles.

Which is only to say don't hold your breath waiting for the United States to consider its insane position on guns. Basically, the kooks in

you sit in front of either of these entertainment vehicles for a significant part of your day (as too many Americans do), soon you have no grasp of reality, no sense that there may be genuine problems out there that demand attention of all of us in the world.

We've heard about the origins of America's gun-culture many times.

When the country was settled more than two hundred years ago, a man needed a rifle to protect himself and his family. Mostly, that meant killing Indians -- the rightful occupiers of our land -- since little thought was given to anyone whose skin was a different colour than their own (slavery fits here, also).

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Re-thinking foreign policy

Presently, economic and commercial interests have received prominence in the formulation of the policy when conducting foreign relations. Therefore, trade, not aid, should receive priority in the foreign policy of Bangladesh, which is still suffering from poverty, natural disasters and uncertain political climate.

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

PRIORILY, the foreign policy of a country is formulated on the basis of core interests of the state flowing from its prerogative to preserve its sovereignty. Territorial disputes are the most common conflict patterns that a nation's foreign policy should be able to address. In this area, the foreign policy of the government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman immediately after independence of Bangladesh complicated the process of demarcation of land and maritime boundaries with India, which surrounds Bangladesh on three sides.

The handing over of Berubari enclave, for example, in exchange for Dahagram and Angarpota enclaves in India could hardly be justified because Berubari enclave was part of Pakistan according to the Noon-Nehru Agreement.

Similarly, many non-demarcated and disputed enclaves, arbitrarily divided on either side of a border, may cause conflict between two neighbouring countries. A glaring example of a serious border clash between Bangladesh and Indian forces occurred in 2000, during the Awami League government.

If a boundary problem remains, the population living along the border of the neighbouring countries is not able to live in peace. The 1962 war between India and China over a remote, mountainous, and largely uninhabitable territory known as Ladakh, and three wars between India and Pakistan over the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, are the results of boundary problems.

The same problem of demarcation of maritime boundaries with Burma (now known as Myanmar) on the southern flank of Bangladesh remains unresolved.

It was a serious mistake of the government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which could have resolved the process of demarcation of land and maritime boundary between Bangladesh and India as well as with Burma, during a favourable political

climate that existed immediately after the birth of Bangladesh.

It is a fact that Bangladesh's foreign policy during this initial period was not a balanced one, as Bangladesh favourably tilted towards the Indo-Soviet axis. The signing of a 25-year friendship treaty with India in 1972 alienated Pakistan and the western countries, while India improved relations with Pakistan at the expense of Bangladesh.

The 25-year friendship treaty was a prototype of the one signed by India and the Soviet Union on August 8, 1971, before the Indian army intervened on behalf of the Mukti Bahini (the army that fought for the independence of Bangladesh) when it demonstrated its ability to survive the onslaught of the Pakistani army.

Moreover, the signing of three-party treaty in India by Pakistan, India and Bangladesh in April, 1973, doomed the trial of the prisoners of war. As a result, the government of Bangladesh could not honour its commitment for holding the trial of the prisoners of war.

The apportionment of assets and liabilities remains unresolved between Bangladesh and Pakistan till today.

Against the backdrop of this scenario, the government of Bangladesh should pursue, both with India and Burma, the resolution of the issue of demarcation of boundaries and disputed enclaves to have peaceful borders, which is a sine qua non for the economic development of the countries in the region.

Geopolitics does not dictate formulation of foreign policy, which was the case in the twentieth century. Bangladesh is surrounded by India on three sides, with a small border with Myanmar in the South-East and the Bay of Bengal on the southern flank.

Therefore, geographical compulsion dictates that laying the foundation of friendly relations with the neighbouring countries should be the cornerstone of the foreign policy of Bangladesh.

Logically, it should focus primarily on its giant, and closest, neighbour: India. Bangladesh and

India share 4,000 kilometres of border, and 54 rivers as well. India, with roughly eight times the population and more than twelve times the GDP, should be the major attention of Bangladesh's foreign policy.

Another area of conflict with India is the equitable sharing of waters of the common rivers. Both Bangladesh and India should sit together to sort out the problem of sharing water to the mutual benefit of the people of each country in line with international maritime law.

Though there is agreement with the comments made by the foreign affairs advisor at the Bangladesh-India dialogue sponsored by the Centre for Policy Dialogue in Dhaka on December 11, the initiative should come from Bangladesh to resolve the sharing of common rivers as per International maritime laws. India cannot deny the rights of the lower riparian country. Attention is invited to an article by this writer, which The Daily Star carried on September 13.

On the other hand, being a big neighbour, India should extend a hand of cooperation to its neighbours in the greater interest of the people of the South-Asian region. This region is inhabited by one billion people living in abject poverty.

Peace and security are prerequisite conditions for the economic development of the countries of the region. It is only in an environment of peace and security that problems can be addressed and tackled successfully.

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Bangladesh is still dependent on foreign aid, and will continue to remain so unless efforts are made to diversify its trade policies. The flow of aid has been declining in recent times.

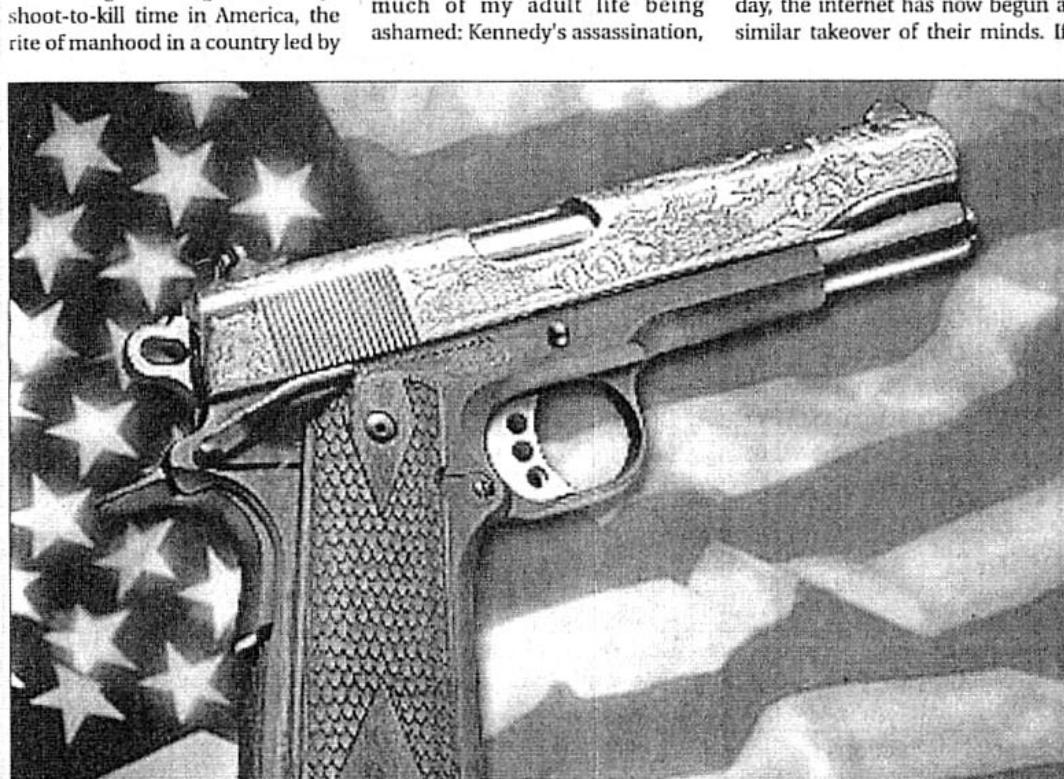
Bangladesh should develop good trade relations with India, where products from Bangladesh could enjoy the market of 90 million at least. Similarly, Bangladesh should pursue with the government of India to allow a corridor to Nepal to use Chalna (Khulna) port in Bangladesh, which would help increase trade relations between Bangladesh and Nepal.

Furthermore, Bangladesh should pursue a policy to cultivate entrepreneurs from India and western countries to encourage direct foreign investment in Bangladesh, which will substantially restructure the country's economy. This will also help open up job opportunities for the unemployed. For the purpose of inviting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), there is an urgent need to increase the level of efficiency of the government, board of investment, national board of revenue, and export promotion bureau in particular. Red tape should be dispensed with to promote trade relations.

The image of the country depends not only on the position of the country in the community of nations, but also on the successes and failures of the political leadership.

As German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck rightly pointed out: "foreign policy is the extension of domestic policy." If domestic policy is not formulated on a correct path a country's foreign policy will not succeed.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, former Bangladesh diplomat, writes from Virginia



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