

## The tragedy of Karbala

*Its teachings transcend time*

**T**HE 10th day of Muharram is a day of mourning for the Muslims of the world. It is also a day of triumph.

The martyrdom of Imam Hussein (RA) along with his entire family in the hands of Yazid, the grandson of one of the greatest of the sworn enemies of the Prophet during the very nascent days of Islam in Mecca, Abu Sufian, on the banks of the Euphrates in Karbala is one of the most tragic tales that have been chronicled in the annals of human history.

But it is also a day of triumph. It was a day when piety triumphed over evil, when principles were defended at the cost of human blood. It was a day which saw the triumph of belief over immorality. It was the tragic outcome of refusal of the beloved grandson of the holy Prophet to accede to the evil demand of Yazid to demonstrate public allegiance to a repressive dictator and a depraved ruler.

It is essential that the two features of significance of the day be appreciated in the spirit that they represent and the emotional and political aspects of this day be fully grasped with equal intensity. While the tragic elements of the event have been immortalized, as they should be, and are remembered and celebrated in many ways, the equally important political significance of the tragedy appears to be lost upon the Muslims of the world.

The greatest teaching of Karbala is the abjuration of war and hostility on the part of Imam Hussein (RA) who knew well the consequence of violence. Instead, he sought resolution through peace and only when his offer was spurned did he choose death with dignity over surrender. His actions were the manifestation of the very quintessential message of Islam.

Regrettably, it is this very teaching that some of the Muslims have forgotten or chosen to disregard today. What must be emphasized is that the concept of Jihad is not the application of violence in resolving disputes, that intolerance must give way to peaceful disposition in human interactions.

Let the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (RA) and the message of Ashura re-inculcate in all Muslims the urge to not only understand the transcendental values of Islam but also to live by these.

## Fighting terrorism

*Danger of extremism should not be ignored*

**W**E in Bangladesh have observed two strands of reaction to the question of terrorism. There are those who have always cried wolf at any mention of terrorism, to a point where they have ended up exaggerating or over-estimating the influence of religious extremism in the country. That has often created a rather sickening doomsday scenario. And then there is the other, equally lamentable truth, which is that influential quarters in the government have always been in denial mode on the terrorism question. One has only to go back to the JMB issue to know how resolutely the government of the day denied its presence, with consequences that were to be horrific. The point here is that we as a nation cannot afford to fall into the pitfalls created by either of the two assumptions above. In other words, we cannot afford to panic and at the same time must not be tempted into adopting a laid-back position.

Rohan Gunaratna, the internationally reputed Sri Lankan researcher and analyst on terrorism, in his insightful assessment of Bangladesh situation maintains that local religious extremists in Bangladesh have no significant links with international terrorism. Furthermore, his assertion that culture and society in Bangladesh make it hard for terrorism to make much of an inroad in the popular consciousness can be taken as vindication of the secular legacy of our country.

The danger of militancy is, however, very real as the simultaneous non-lethal bombing of all but one district towns in Bangladesh by some organised extremists had indicated. We agree with Gunaratna that Bangladesh's extremists may be more fired by ideology than by any direct links with international networks. To be sure, the very moderate nature of society, where a practice of religion is concerned, has so far prevented us from falling into an extremist abyss, unlike the situation in some other countries. But unless our existing social, cultural and political structures are firmed up and then constantly refurbished, our ability to beat back the forces of terrorism may weaken. It is here that politicians, educationists and religious personalities must pursue, separately or in unison, programmes that will promote and strengthen such structures. Our ulema, respected as they have been for generations, must speak up in defence of the true spirit of Islam and thereby prevent the extremist militant fringe from commandeering the religion to serve its nefarious and violent purposes.

A society damages itself when its moderate majority remains silent in the face of an onslaught on decency by a tiny minority. It is time for that silent majority to assert itself. Finally, the nation's political parties must move away from a tendency to employ religion for narrow electoral gains if they mean to promote national welfare.

## Charting our way forward



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

**I**F conflict between civilizations is replacing the ideological animosity that ended with the cold war then it becomes necessary to understand the term civilization, that Samuel Huntington described as basically a cultural entity, and that the most important conflicts in the future will occur along the cultural fault lines. The differences among civilizations are not only real but are also basic. Among these differences the most important is religion.

One only has to look at the transformation of the former constituent parts of the USSR and Eastern Europe, including the Russian Federation, where former goddess societies have turned to religion like ducks to water and have embraced either the Russian Orthodox Church or Catholicism.

It must, however, be recognised that with the collapse of the Soviet Union six Muslim Republics came into existence in the Caucasus and Central Asia and helped the emergence of Muslim dominated Bosnia in former Yugoslavia and the regeneration of Islam in Southern Europe and the eclipse of Turkey

## GOING DEEPER

**Bangladesh needs highly educated people to be competitive in the increasingly globalised market, and each citizen to be economically productive. Democracy without economic advancement, or in Joseph Stiglitz's terminology "moral growth," would be meaningless. In the ultimate analysis, any policy freely arrived at, that brings greater good to the greater number of people should be the aim of democracy that we aspire for.**

as the only Muslim state in Europe.

Late Edward Said saw Huntington's Clash of Civilizations as a "vastly over-rated article, the core of its belligerent (and dishearteningly ignorant thesis) was the battle between the West and Islam (which he sagely warned would become even more dangerous when it was allied with Confucianism)." Said warned that Huntington's thesis, that attracted huge attention in the West, has tickled the intellect of the Westerners to understand this "rebellious and somehow resistant culture (Impossible Histories: Harper's July 2002)."

Thanks to Osama bin Laden and the terrorist acts of 9/11 the impatient West, which saw some of the subaltern colonialists as hewers of wood and drawers of water being catapulted to center stage of world politics as a threat to their way of living and objected to the insolence of these ingrates still dependant on their munificence to which many in the developing world were still beholden to.

Edward Said's criticism notwithstanding, the fact remains

that the Muslim diaspora in the West has been reduced to negotiating a second class citizenship in their countries of birth, and that the race riots of last year in France and several West European countries were the direct result of the exclusion of the Muslim community from the mainstream development of these countries.

Many in Europe had forgotten that the parents of the rioting youths were invited into these countries to bolster the sagging European economies after the devastation caused by the Second World War.

But, true to the metropolitan-periphery principle followed by the erstwhile colonial powers, the Third World invitees, particularly those of different faith, were relegated to the ghettos on the outskirts of the cities where they were expected to go back after the toils of the day were over.

Though such discriminatory treatment was accepted by the first generation immigrants, who were grateful for the opportunity for getting a better life than the one their home country could have offered, the second and third generation immigrants considered themselves as no less

Europeans and, consequently, deliberate exclusionary policies followed by the authorities generated frustration and discontent that finally found expression in violence. The native Europeans remained indifferent to the accumulated frustration of this group of people.

Interestingly, the Westerners never acknowledged, as pointed out by Professor Stephen Zunes, that "from the time of the Crusades through the European colonial era to the ongoing bombings in Iraq, Western Christians killed far more Muslims than the reverse. Given this strong sense of history among Muslims, Washington's use and threat of military force, its imposition of punitive sanctions, and its support of oppressive governments result in a popular reaction that often takes the form of religious extremism."

Though some people have reservations about the term "Islamic fundamentalism," partly because going back to the fundamentals or the root of any faith does not necessarily mean divorce from modernity, though a fear lurks in many Muslim minds that large scale westernisation

contains elements of contradiction with Islamic culture, and also due to the fact that the term "fundamentalism" originated in Christianity and there was never a theocratic or clergy run state before the Iranian revolution of 1979 led by Ayatollah Khomeini.

The efforts of political Islam aimed at establishing an Islamic political order world-wide through challenging the status quo in the Muslim states and through transnational networks by forcing out the regimes that cohort with the West have given the Muslim faith a false identity of threatening others belonging to other faiths without interrogating whether the faith itself and majority of its followers believe in violence as seen in London, Madrid, Bali and many other places.

That these incidents of terrorism are manifestations of an internal struggle between the extremists and moderates within the Islamic world for the soul of Islam was often sidestepped.

Closer to home, President Musharraf's admission in a recent interview with Newsweek's Fareed Zakaria that his failure to contain extremists is due to the fact that they are Pakistanis from South Punjab, where al-Qaeda hides its operatives in the many madrassas (religious schools), is very worrying because of its extra-territorial implications.

In a report to the US Congress the Congressional Research Service pointed out that the number of madrassas in Pakistan increased more than ten-fold from 1947 to 1988 in apparent correspondence with the deteriorating

of the public education system, with ten percent of madrassas having links with terrorist groups.

The terrorist incidents in Bangladesh last year testify to the apprehension of many in this country that Islamic extremism, initially tolerated and then encouraged by some political leaders, has not been rooted out by the execution of a few leaders of JMB and Harkatul Jihad.

The national demand to try war criminals, ban the Islamists from participating in the forthcoming elections, and cancel the equivalence of madrassa degrees with those given by our colleges and universities should not be regarded as un-Islamic.

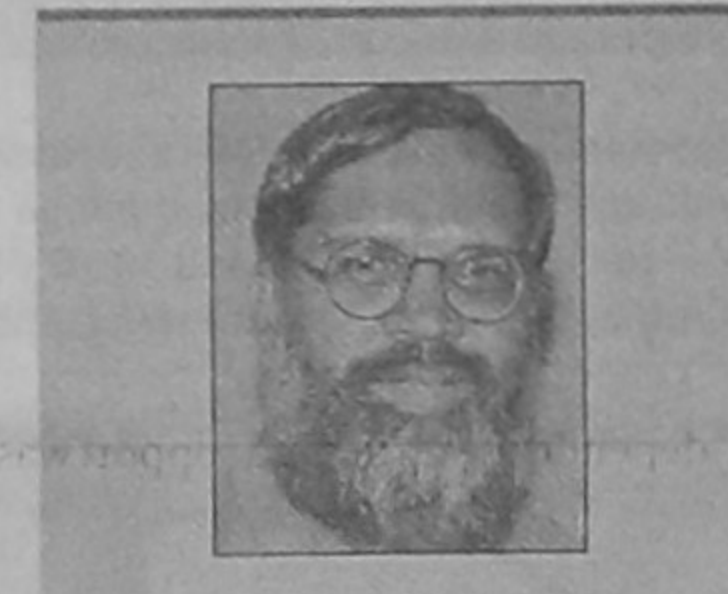
While the genocide and other war crimes trial will reestablish the rule of law in the country, the cancellation of equivalence of religious degrees with the secular ones will help democracy that needs an efficient knowledge based bureaucracy rather than one mainly conversant with spiritual knowledge of life after death.

Bangladesh needs highly educated people to be competitive in the increasingly globalised market, and each citizen to be economically productive. Democracy without economic advancement, or in Joseph Stiglitz's terminology "moral growth," would be meaningless.

In the ultimate analysis, any policy freely arrived at, that brings greater good to the greater number of people should be the aim of democracy that we aspire for.

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## The unaffordable Rs 1 lakh car



PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

**"R**S 1 lakh car drives 1 billion dreams," "Tata reinvents the wheel," screamed the headlines as the media rapturously welcomed Tata Motors' Nano amidst rousing music. The car has been called "revolutionary" and a "historic breakthrough" which makes "every Indian inches taller," and will trigger innovation in manufacturing technology the world over!

The Nano is expected to do to India what Ford's Model-T did a century ago to the United States by "democratising" car ownership. It's being depicted as an achievement not of one business group or industry, but as the triumph of the nation, with its consumer-citizens.

However, the Nano is marked by inadequate safety and emission standards. Thanks to its low price, it will greatly expand India's market for cars. Their proliferation will cause unbearable traffic congestion, enormous pollution and health damage, and set back the all-

## THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

**According to pollution experts, ultra-cheap, bare-bones cars like the Nano lack the complex technology needed to maintain its initial level of emissions, which could grow four- to five-fold. Under the Nano trend, industry will rush to produce ultra-cheap cars by exploiting India's poor emission standards. Bajaj Auto, Volkswagen, Nissan and GM are already in this race. The addition of stripped-down cars will further slow down urban traffic -- whose speed has almost halved recently. This will greatly increase pollution, which has reached critical levels in three-fifths of India's cities.**

important fight against global warming

Automobile proliferation won't "democratise" society. In a poor and frugal society, cars polarise; they don't unite.

The Nano's most attractive, iconic feature -- the Rs 1-lakh price -- is probably an illusion. It hides big subsidies.

The Tata Motors plant coming up in West Bengal, which will produce the Nano, is subsidised by at least Rs 850 crores by the state government, according to economist and former finance minister Ashok Mitra. This works out to one-fourth of the project's capital cost.

To further sweeten the deal, the government has gifted to the Tatas 50 acres of prime land just outside Kolkata and another 200 acres close by to build IT and residential townships. The total subsidy may, thus, be huge.

Besides, the super-attractive price is only applicable to the bare-bones model as an introductory offer. Mr. Ratan Tata said: "We may not be able to hold the

price emotionally. We have to understand that steel and tyre prices... are rising."

The Nano's cost has been ruthlessly pared down. The upside is unconventional thinking focused on minimalism, which may trigger industry-wide cost-cutting.

The downside is the cutting of corners to produce a car with low longevity and high maintenance, which fails the current Western emission and safety standards, and will soon fail Indian norms too.

For instance, the Nano's designers used a hollow shaft instead of a solid beam to connect the steering-wheel to the axle, and plastics and adhesives instead of many bolts. The car's wheel bearings will wear out rapidly beyond 70 kmph.

It has only one windshield-wiper instead of two. It uses obsolete continuous variable transmission. To save just Rs 400, devices called actuators, which adjust the angle of the car's lights to its load, were eliminated.

This is likely to affect the car's safety, sturdiness and durability/longevity. Some impacts will only become apparent once it has been used for a few years. Till then, safety and reliability questions will remain.

The Nano doesn't remotely meet the current Western emission standards like Euro-IV, and will soon fail Indian standards too. Tata's claim that the Nano meets prevalent national standards Bharat-II and -III isn't verified independently.

Euro-IV norms will come into force in India's major cities in April 2010, and are much stricter than Bharat-II or III. Under them, sulphur emissions must be reduced 35-fold over Bharat-II.

Similarly, long-overdue safety standards are on their way. These include full-body crash tests -- which determine how cars crumple in collisions -- airbags and anti-lock brake systems. Implementing them will raise costs by 40 to 50 per cent.

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the Nano lack the complex technology needed to maintain its initial level of emissions, which could grow four- to five-fold.

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Yet, India is following a policy under which a car can legally occupy the same space as a slum-dwelling family considered fit for eviction.

This must radically change so that public transport is given top priority and people can be moved in safe, efficient and environmentally sound ways and have equitable and affordable access to public transport.

Automobilisation of transport spells high social costs, resource waste, air pollution, global warming, and iniquitous use of road-space. In most Indian cities, cars and two-wheelers hog 60 to 80 per cent of space, but deliver 15 to 20 per cent of passenger trips.

By contrast, buses occupy under 20 per cent of road-space, and account for up to 60 per cent of trips. Cars demand high levels of maintenance, repairs and parking space. They usually occupy prime space -- even when unused.

Studies show that if car-owners were made to pay the economic rent for parking, many would stop using them. In the central districts of many Indian cities, for instance, the true annual market price of parking-space per car would exceed its nominal cost 5 to 10-fold!

Cars are an extremely inefficient form of transportation. They slow down public transport, causing further congestion and an enormous waste of social time.

Above all, cars pollute. Automobile emissions of particulate matter, and oxides of nitrogen and sulphur account for 60 percent-plus of the air pollution load in our cities, itself fraught with grievous health damage. Fine particulates contain some 40 known carcinogens.

If present trends are allowed to continue, India's car market will annually grow at 14.5 per cent by 2013. By 2020, more than 150 million Indians and 140 million Chinese will have cars.

If this happens, it will become near-impossible to achieve major reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions. China and India account for as much as 70 per cent of the recent global increase in energy demand.

The Nano should provoke us all to rethink transportation policies in keeping with the requirements of equity and reversing climate change.

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## Significance of George Bush's Middle East tour

**Has the Bush administration given up its strategic goals in Asia after the sad and unexpected experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan? Actually, it still retains long-term interest in these regions. The recent tour to the Middle East gives hints that the US has far reaching plans about the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the whole of Asia.**

MD. MASUM BILLAH

**B**USH ended his eight day Middle East trip a few days ago, sparking questions concerning various issues, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran's nuclear capability. But the most significant part of his tour has been the resumed peace process between Israel and Palestine, which had remained dormant for more than seven years as it received very scant importance from the Bush administration. George Bush's visit to Ramallah gave the green signal for the Middle East peace process, as he called for an end to Israel's 41-year occupation of Palestinian

lands and stated a commitment to forge a peace agreement before the end of his tenure in office. Bush said: "I believe its going to happen, that there's going to be a signed peace treaty by the time I leave office." He further emphasised that the Palestinian refugees would be paid compensation for the loss of homes when they fled after occupation by Israel.

A plethora of questions comes into the minds of the political critics. Should the Middle East people believe in this promise? Are the Americans really honest in sponsoring the peace deal? If we look at the tour, it shows that Bush wants to score a foreign policy triumph before he leaves

office next January. America worries about the supposed serious threat from Iran, which is continuing its civilian nuclear programme. Bush has offered to sell \$20 billion of advance weaponry to Arab allies, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, to bolster their defense against Iran, a close ally of Syria.

In a brief appearance with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Bush dealt gently with the pace of political reform in Egypt, the first Arab state to make peace with Israel and the recipient of the highest US aid except Israel. "I emphasised that the Palestinians question, of course, is the core of problems and conflict in the Middle East," Mubarak

told the reporters after he and Bush met and had lunch at the Red Sea resort. Mubarak was among those who told Bush that he was creating a larger problem by causing the perception that he is too partial to Israel. Syria candidly said that the main aim of Bush's Middle East tour was to scare Persian Gulf countries into buying weapons by portraying Iran as a threat.

The Palestinian state must be viable and contiguous, whereas the eight mile long corridor between Gaza and the West Bank belongs to Israel. Without connecting Gaza Strip with the West Bank, a Palestinian state would be unstable and vulnerable. If the corridor is handed over to the Palestinians, Palestine would be complete. There is no agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority for sharing water and electricity. The continued presence of some 220,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank remains a big question. These are

the key issues of Israel, including the future of Jerusalem and the Palestine refugees. Until and unless these issues receive proper and true attention from Israel and its "guru" this tour will hardly bring any tangible solution.

Has the Bush administration given up its strategic goals in Asia after the sad and unexpected experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan? Actually, it still retains long-term interest in these regions. The recent tour to the Middle East gives hints that the US has far reaching plans about the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the whole of Asia. Just after the tour, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert warned that Israel and Palestine might not reach a peace deal that Bush has predicted within a year as both sides began discussing core issues. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and former Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qurei met in Jerusalem. The meeting lasted for two hours

in a good and constructive environment. They discussed the core issues and agreed to continue the talks on an intensive basis. "I'm not sure we can reach an agreement and I'm not sure we can see its implementation. But I will be committing a sin if I didn't try," a senior government official said, quoting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

The opposition want to maintain the status quo at any price. "I say this is dangerous, adventurous and irresponsible," said the head of the opposition. Olmert actually faces internal criticism over the talks, with two member of his coalition threatening to quit if core issues are discussed.

In the meantime, Israel has ordered all border crossings into Gaza temporarily closed. The tightening of the blockade could make life more difficult for Gaza's already impoverished residents. Palestinians are already suffering shortages of food, fuel, spare parts of cars, computer, paper

and other supplies since Israel imposed the siege after Hamas seized the territory in June. "It is imperative that these crossings are opened so that the dire situation in Gaza does not deteriorate further, inflicting further misery on one and half million people who live there," Christopher Gennesse, the spokesman for UNRWA, the UN Agency in charge of Palestinian refugees commented. Closing the crossings can only lead to the further radicalisation of a depressed and demoralised people. Past experience has shown such kind of development.

Tel Aviv must take into account that the security of Israel is not an isolated factor, rather it is related to the economic situation of the Gazans and the people huddled in the refugee camps. When they have no food and drink due to this closure, they respond to it like they have for so long. Why have the already inflicted people been further infuriated? Don't

they attach any importance or significance to what George Bush has said regarding the peace deal? Israelis must show restraint, otherwise the world will take Bush's visit as trying to forge a united force in the Middle East to wage war against Iran, which will definitely bring irreparable loss to either side.

The increasing violence has clouded Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, which resumed after the Middle East Conference in Annapolis Conference, and the ray of hope which emanated from the recent tour of Bush to the Middle East. In the Annapolis Conference Bush claimed: "The foundation for establishment of a new nation, a democratic Palestinian state that will live side by side with Israel in peace and security." Let this tour be considered as a part of this claim.

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