

Essence of Lailatul Baraat

An occasion to purify the soul

MUSLIMS will be observing Lailatul Baraat tonight with due religious fervour and solemnity. It will be time once again for the community as a whole to remember the Almighty and remember too the core of the message coming out of Islam. The message is one of leading a life of purity, away from all worldly temptations and in all the consciousness that life on earth is but a preparation for life in the hereafter. And yet it is on how men and women conduct themselves in the temporal world that their spirituality or awareness of faith in its widest meaning depends.

Such awareness, especially on Lailatul Baraat, comes necessarily through a readiness on the part of the individual to atone for the sins he has committed over time and to do all that may draw him away from such sinning. It is a hard task, considering that human nature is but a synonym for endless demonstrations of frailties. Tonight, it is expected that Muslims, being cognisant of the limits of human self-control, will nevertheless seek forgiveness of Allah for the mistakes and the deviations that have been a mark of life for them, particularly since they last prayed to the Almighty for the moral and psychological strength to make themselves stay away from avarice and all other flaws that mar the quality of life. Lailatul Baraat is that moment in divinity when the Almighty answers prayers, when those prayers are offered up in the right spirit and in all sincerity. It is thus a night when, apart from thoughts of an expiation of sin, Muslims call forth the courage in themselves to seek the munificence that comes from Allah. On this night, through purposeful prayers and a meaningful acknowledgement of the true meaning of faith, Muslims can ask the Creator for those bounties that strengthen their faith. The Almighty is pleased to respond, for He does not disappoint his creation.

On Lailatul Baraat, it is also important that Muslims reflect on the precarious conditions in which their community lives today. The message that should go out today is that Islam is a religion of peace, that it absolutely abjures violence and killing of the innocent and promotes peace and harmony among different communities in the world. A good Muslim is he who seeks knowledge, in the words of the Prophet of Islam, from the cradle to the grave. Along the way, he meets other people and other cultures and respects them. In the end, it is the beauty of civilised, pious life that a good Muslim upholds and celebrates. Let this thought go out to everyone tonight.

The insufferable traffic jams

A short-term action plan suggested

WASTING three to four of our daily working hours on the street, if not more, while commuting to and from places is the sordid tale of our paralytic life in Dhaka city. With valuable man hours lost, absenteeism growing, output shrinking, incomes and opportunities lost, sickening trauma of endless waiting telling upon mental and physical health, there is no end to the adverse effects of unabated traffic congestion. The land area of the city being limited and the road network more so, the intensity of the commutation snarls is driven home in the most poignant manner.

The traffic situation is so bristling that it cries out for immediate relief. Let the long and medium term plans take their own turns, what we direly need at the moment is to concentrate on a short term action plan that after an accurate diagnosis of the immediate problems seeks to redress them.

It is learnt on the authority of the people who know (but did nothing about it!) that about one lakh jalopies of motor vehicles which had disappeared from the streets after the promulgation of Emergency are back on the street occupying the already critically crowded road spaces. Secondly, as against 87,000 licensed rickshaws, five lakh are plying in the city. The longer tailbacks in the city in the recent times are easily explainable in terms of such deplorable developments.

The question is: how could the dilapidated vehicles make their reappearance without the connivance of the police or BRTA? Traffic sergeants have been asked to impound road unworthy transports with an incentive given to them but the pertinent question is: why a blind eye was turned to their reappearance in the first place? Do we keep or have the statistics for such vehicles? What are the criteria followed? The reason why we ask the barrage of questions is to address the gaps in the supervision with an immediate effect. The traffic authorities should order the dilapidated vehicles out of the street and follow up with compliance measures. BRTA, for its part, should refrain from issuing fitness certificates to such vehicles about which generally it has earned quite a notoriety.

The second place where we must press the button is to require of the Dhaka City Corporation to adhere to a realistic limit being put on the number of rickshaws to ply in the city. Surely, five lakh is far too high a number to be had. The rickshaws need phasing out with concrete action taken for alternative employment of those who ply them having being driven by unemployment in the rural areas.

Reinstating National Mourning Day is just the first step



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

LIKE every other patriotic Bangladeshi, I have welcomed the decision of the caretaker government to restore the sanctity of August 15 as the National Mourning Day. By doing so, they have reaffirmed the belief of people of this country that Bangabandhu was not only the Father of this Nation but also that what happened on the tragic night of August 15, 1975 was a crime whose final adjudication needs to be completed. We are referring here to a man who unwaveringly followed his dream of a separate homeland for the Bangladeshis. With courage and determination, he welcomed incarceration and despite that stuck to his task and his conviction. He did not agree to compromises and half-way solutions. In that context, he became synonymous with an idea and became the symbol of freedom and independence.

Bangalees were lucky to have Bangabandhu in their midst. Unfortunately, instead of profiting from his resolute leadership, they

paid him back with murder. Misunderstood by certain sections of the armed forces and a group of disgruntled politicians, he was assassinated along with many members of his immediate family. I was abroad when it happened, and could only respond to this crime through spontaneous words of poetry. (I wrote a poem entitled "Fifteenth of August" -- given below -- two days after the incident).

Murder was bad enough, but what followed was even worse. On September 26, 1975 through an Extraordinary Bangladesh Gazette Notification, the nation was informed by the usurper President Khandaker Moshataque Ahmed and his compliant secretary of the Ministry of Law, Parliamentary Affairs and Justice that under The Indemnity Ordinance, 1975 (Ordinance No XIX) restrictions had been put in place with regard to

inside the Dhaka Central Jail. A three-member Judicial Commission, as expected, was immediately constituted to investigate the matter, but that was the end of that story. Nothing happened.

It took 21 years before the crime could be addressed. The Awami League government sworn into office in 1996, took two important steps -- the overturning of the iniquitous indemnity provision

window. On July 28, 2002, the alliance government cancelled the National Mourning Day, and also it being a public holiday. While scrapping the status of August 15, the BNP led government argued that, previously, the day had neither been fixed nor observed as such. From this point of view, it was termed as an unacceptable innovation. This was politics of hatred at its best. Instead, more emphasis was given to the day when the

abroad. This affirms the establishment of the rule of law and facilitates the showing of due respect to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. This persuades me to state that reinstating this day as National Mourning Day is just the first step.

It is true that this latest decision will help the people of Bangladesh to reiterate their love for the late leader. However, like many others, I want to see a full conclusion of this process. This must include a swift completion of the trial of those alleged to be the killers. In this regard, steps also need to be taken to identify where those charged with the crime are presently residing (if they have not been apprehended as yet) and to bring them to justice. This will require political will, and that needs to be evident in the future course of action. Everyone must have their day in court and if found innocent, should be allowed to live as free citizens. Conversely, they should, if found guilty, be allowed full process of appeal. The judicial process must be completed -- the sooner the better. Without this, our homage to the great leader will sound hollow.

We, as a nation, must move forward. The final resolution will also underline that crime does not pay and indemnity is not available for anyone participating in a violent conspiracy that leads to mayhem and murder.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador and can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

POST BREAKFAST

It is true that this latest decision will help the people of Bangladesh to reiterate their love for the late leader. However, like many others, I want to see a full conclusion of this process. This must include a swift completion of the trial of those alleged to be the killers. In this regard, steps also need to be taken to identify where those charged with the crime are presently residing (if they have not been apprehended as yet) and to bring them to justice.

"Seeking the easy companionship of hypocrisy and hate, in one hour, that night, when justice slept and so did the saints, butchers roamed the streets of Dhaka. They swept aside innocence, their eyes showing as much clarity as glass. Their assault was brief, their savagery laying waste to trust. They faced no obstacle in their mind to the fact that they killed their own kind. The voice of liberty was snuffed out by the very men trained to save, rather than maim."

"taking any legal or other proceedings in respect of certain acts or things done in connection with, or in preparation or execution of any plan for, or steps necessitating, the historical change and the proclamation of Martial Law on the morning of August 15th, 1975."

What followed was natural. When murderers know there is no accountability for their actions, they do not hesitate to commit another crime. That is exactly what happened on November 3, 1975. Four prominent leaders of the Awami League, formerly ministers, including the acting president and the prime minister during our War of Liberation, were brutally killed

and the initiation of a normal judicial process (unlike the creation of a Special Tribunal which hastened the adjudication after President Zia's murder) to try those guilty of the crimes committed on August 15 1975. In this context, quite justifiably, the government also declared that day as the National Mourning Day and a public holiday. This was done not because Bangabandhu was the father of the then prime minister but because he was the founding father of the country.

Then came the BNP government, and we saw once again their obdurate hatred for Bangabandhu. Basic civility was cast out of the

founder of BNP was killed by another group of misguided, ambitious armed forces officers in 1981. The judicial process pertaining to the alleged killers of Bangabandhu was also more or less suspended through machinations between the politicised judiciary and the government in power.

Fortunately for the people, due process of law and the principle of natural justice were upheld on July 27, 2008, when the High Court declared illegal the cancellation of this significant Mourning Day. The government decided to abide by the High Court decision. On this day national flag again flew at half-mast in all Bangladesh Missions

The need for transformational leadership



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE refusal of some politicians, who held the reins of government and, consequently, the fate of the people of the country in their hands in the past to abide by the existing laws relating to depoliticisation of the local bodies from mainstream political parties and refusal by a political leader to enlist as a voter unless released from detention are examples of disregard by them of the rule of law.

It can, however, be argued that laws are unconstitutional and, hence, need not be obeyed. But unless the highest rung of the judiciary declares the relevant laws to be unconstitutional these remain legally enforceable.

It is just as well that some of the recently elected mayors and councillors have decided to challenge in the court of law the validity of the Election Commission's rule that they have to sever ties with the political parties on whose ticket they fought the elections and got elected.

Some legal experts claim that enlistment as a voter by a certain

date, as insisted upon by the Election Commission for eligibility to contest in elections, is unlawful because the existing laws on eligibility of a candidate for elections and those provided in the constitution do not support the position taken by the Election Commission.

One hopes that the person refusing to enlist as a voter, because that person is now in detention on corruption charges, knowing full

not transactional leadership (the concepts are defined by Harvard Professor Joseph Nye in his book The power to lead and James Burns in his book Leadership). Transactional approach concentrates on the narrow path of giving to the people social goods in exchange of votes in the short term, while transformational leaders engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one

In countries like Bangladesh, lack of education and consequent lack of effective social coordination essential for deliberative democracy have produced in the past the absence of coherent majoritarianism that requires deliberations on all issues because the majority also remains accountable to the minority though it can outvote the minority.

In addition, open deliberation

welcomed the intervention of 1/11 because it was seen as an act of saving the country from inevitable confrontation between a corrupt government bent on remaining in power by hook or by crook and the other political parties backed by the majority of the population.

Since, like Alice in Wonderland, Bangladesh has to run all the time to remain at the same place, we have to get ourselves out of the morass that

manufactured goods, coupled with adverse terms of trade for our exportable items in the international market and compounded by deportation of large number of Bangladeshis from the Middle East, a sector that accounts for a sizeable portion of our foreign exchange earnings, do not augur well for the country's economic growth in the short term.

The state of stagnation now afflicting the economy is bound to contribute to social disharmony embedded in asymmetric distribution of wealth among different segments of our society.

While the interim caretaker government (CTG) deserves credit for institutional reforms it has undertaken in curbing corruption (the step appears to be faltering) and to bring about transparency in the electoral process and in administration, one has to admit that transformational leadership can only be provided by the elected representatives who are intimately conversant with the needs and aspirations of the people and who can enthuse them to take the country forward.

The CTG may consider listening to the views expressed by the political parties on different issues and hold the parliamentary elections soonest possible to make way for transition to democracy sought both by the people of Bangladesh and the international community.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

GOING DEEPER

While the interim caretaker government deserves credit for institutional reforms it has undertaken in curbing corruption and to bring about transparency in the electoral process and in administration, one has to admit that transformational leadership can only be provided by the elected representatives who are intimately conversant with the needs and aspirations of the people and who can enthuse them to take the country forward.

well that unless enlisted as a voter that person would not be able to contest in the next general election, would also decide to challenge the constitutional validity of this regulation of the Election Commission in the appropriate court of law.

While none can disregard the urgent need for establishment of participatory democracy at the earliest possible time, as evidenced by the huge turnout of voters during the local bodies' elections, it also has to be ensured that the country does not slide back to the situation prevailing just before the 1/11 declaration of the state of emergency.

Bangladesh needs transformational leadership and

another to higher levels of motivation and morality." Joseph Nye adds, "morally good and consequently effective transformational leaders provide an inspiring vision of goals that overcome self interest and unites groups around common purposes."

Besides constitutional liberalism insists that regimes be predicated on the protection of individual liberty and the rule of law. It has, however, been pointed out that even in very mature liberal and constitutional regimes the rule of law can only be maintained in the face of onslaught by the powerful by the society's response through superior force in defence of law.

lends majority decisions greater legitimacy because such decisions are reached through the mechanism of getting most votes backed by best arguments.

Though Bangladesh never had the feudal system that some countries in South Asia had experienced as a colonial legacy and still have to grapple with its residual effects, yet one is surprised at the regularity of rule by an oligarchy of elites, coming from both the industrial and the agrarian and rural and urban sectors, that visited the country particularly on occasions when extra-constitutional forces imposed their presence on the polity of the nation.

But then again, the people

has enveloped us. The current price spiral is estimated to have pushed an additional thirty million people below the poverty line.

The report on climate change predicts Bangladesh to be one of the ten most adversely affected countries in the world, with a part of the country going under water and about thirty million people becoming "climate change refugees" seeking food and shelter within the country, already the most densely populated in the world, or in other countries where they would not be welcome.

Increasing fuel price internationally, leading to increased production cost of our agriculture and

SETTING JAMMU & KASHMIR ON FIRE

BJP stoops to a new low



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

JAMMU and Kashmir is burning. Jammu has witnessed an intensely communal violent agitation for over 7 weeks over the cancellation of an order transferring 100 acres of forest land to Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB).

This is pitting Jammu against Kashmir, ethnic group against ethnic group and Hindus against Muslims in dangerous ways.

The Bharatiya Janata Party has politicised and exploited the agitation cynically. It imposed an economic blockade, which closed the Jammu-Srinagar highway for weeks, causing public suffering. Jammu's intolerance is reproduced like a mirror-image in the

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

The BJP's plans went awry. The victorious, now-aggressive, Manmohan Singh couldn't be convincingly depicted as "India's weakest-ever prime minister." The BJP botched up its manipulative political act, where it's supposedly unmatched. As trouble brews in its state units, the BJP will use inflammatory tactics to rescue itself.

Kashmir Valley, where mainstream parties and separatists marched to Muzaffarabad with the ostensible aim of selling perishable fruit in Pakistan -- just when the blockade was lifted. More than 20 people were killed in high-handed police action.

The twin agitations threaten J&K's unity and multi-cultural, multi-religious character in unprecedented ways. In less than 2 months, the BJP has driven an emotional and political wedge between Jammu and Kashmir -- something that pro-Pakistan jihadis couldn't achieve in the nearly 20 years of the azadi movement.

The present ferment is traceable to the state government's decision to establish the SASB, messing gratuitously with spontaneous Hindu-Muslim joint organisation of the pilgrimage. When the government illegally

transferred land to the SASB, protests broke out. The Valley protestors gave a communal colour to the transfer, prompting its cancellation -- and counter-protests in Jammu organised by the Shri Amarnath Sangharsh Samiti (SASS).

The twin agitations have deepened communal polarisation, and strengthened both Hurriyat and Hindutva.

The Centre failed to open the Jammu-Srinagar highway until it was too late. Its attempt to defuse the situation through an 18-member all-party committee hasn't made headway.

The SASS wants the land re-transferred to the SASB and Governor NN Vohra removed. Such demands are vindictive or devoid

of political rationality. This only shows that the BJP wants to politically milk the Jammu agitation.

The SASS is basically a Sangh Parivar enterprise. Its three top leaders have RSS backgrounds and are linked with the J&K National Front, which demands the state's trifurcation: Jammu and Kashmir as separate states, and Ladakh a Union Territory.

The demand is despicably communal. The RSS backed it in 2001. In the 2002 Assembly elections, it supported the Jammu State Morcha, which demands statehood for Jammu.

Any division of Jammu and Kashmir along religious lines is a recipe for the separation of the Kashmir Valley from India. It will freeze two opposing identities -- a "Muslim Kashmir," and a "Hindu

Jammu."

Nothing could better help the Valley's pro-Pakistan anti-secular separatists like Syed Ali Shah Gilani.

The demand for trifurcating J&K will play straight into the hands of Pakistani hardliners. They want to erase whatever progress has been made in informal talks seeking a solution to the Kashmir problem without redrawing boundaries, and crave Kashmir's accession to Pakistan -- as "the unfinished agendas of Partition."

Why has the BJP embarked on this course? It is desperate to rescue its sagging fortunes any which way. It's agitating the Amarnath issue nationally with shopworn clichés like "injustice to Hindus."

The BJP even denies that there ever was an economic blockade in J&K! It calls this "a myth" and con-

tends that the Jammu agitation is entirely peaceful.

Jammu's protestors, who increasingly look like Hindutva's storm-troopers in Gujarat-2002, indulged in stone and acid throwing attacks on truck drivers.

According to the far-from-hostile state government, Jammu has recently witnessed 10,513 protests and 359 "serious incidents of violence," in which 28 government buildings, 15 police vehicles and 118 private vehicles were damaged.

Eighty cases of communal violence were registered, in which 20 persons were injured and 72 Gujar homes were burnt.

As many as 117 police personnel and 78 civilians were injured in the Jammu violence. Schools, colleges, government offices and hospitals were paralysed.

Grievances in Jammu, many of them legitimate, took this regrettably violent expression thanks to communalism's baneful effect.

The BJP was pivotal to this violence. Its leaders have gone back to crude, super-sectarian Hindutva.

Mr. L.K. Advani just can't wait to become prime minister. His speeches have become shrill, and

his body language has changed. This is no longer the man to inherit the "moderate" Vajpayee legacy. This is the Advani of the Rathayatra -- warlike, spewing communal venom, and leaving a trail of blood.

Mr. Advani will now stoop to any level to collect political brownie-points. The other day, he focused on the UPA government's "weakness" in the face of terrorism. Then, it was the India-US nuclear deal, the culmination of a long process the BJP itself initiated.

Now, he's drumming up Hindu-chauvinist hysteria, laying claim to the 100 acres on the specious ground that the Hindus have the first claim to land anywhere in India by virtue of their numerical majority, and hence primacy.

This proposition is egregiously, if classically, anti-secular.

Why is the BJP so desperate? Barely one month ago, after a series of Assembly wins, it had primed itself up into believing that its victory was imminent in the next Lok Sabha. It even started announcing candidacies.

The BJP was checkmated during the confidence vote, and Mr. Advani was eclipsed by Ms.

Mayawati's dramatic emergence as an alternative.

The BJP's plans went awry. The victorious, now-aggressive, Manmohan Singh couldn't be convincingly depicted as "India's weakest-ever prime minister." The BJP botched up its manipulative political act, where it's supposedly unmatched.

It wanted to create a Bofors out of the cash-for-votes "sting." But after the CNN-IBN tapes, that looks like collusive but ineffective "entrapment."

The highest number of MPs defying their party whip during the confidence vote were from the BJP. Thanks to its MPs' involvement in the "cash-for-questions" scam, human trafficking, and the latest defalcation, the BJP has lost 17 of its original 137 Lok Sabha seats.

The National Democratic Alliance once had 24 members. Now it's down to five.

As trouble brews in its state units, the BJP will use inflammatory tactics to rescue itself. The public will pay the price -- unless it sends the party packing.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.