

The essence of Eid-ul-Fitr

Celebration with renewal of commitment to society

EID-UL-FITR brings with it a sense of joy we associate with a benign commitment to sharing it with others. Coming as it does immediately after the end of Ramadan, it is for all Muslims an occasion not only to celebrate but also to introspect and reflect on the degree to which we have brought ourselves closer to the true tenets of the religion and how prepared are we to identify ourselves with the woe of the disadvantaged and less fortunate members of society. It is not enough to be empathetic of their plight but also to contribute our mite to serving the cause of collective well-being. Through a month of sacrifice and the process of self-purification we came to stage of giving zakat and fitra as a more than symbolic act of piety.

The Eid prayers and the embrace that follows are expressions of brotherhood, fellow feeling and solidarity of all people. In the mundane world, there is a surge in trade and commerce which has a lift-pump effect on the entire economy. The volumes of sale and business increases manifold with a rapid rise in terms of productivity, procurement and supplies. Also, new products signifying trade diversification come into the market with fresh merchandising, advertising and fashion designing. In catering to the varied tastes, the market achieves diversification with our export potential increasing to that extent.

There are, however, twin responsibilities and obligations that must accompany this overarching, buoyant trend. It is in keeping with the spirit of Ramadan and that of Eid-ul-Fitr, that the wealthy and affluent should have exercised restraint in their personal purchases so as not to have indulged in a show of wealth, even unwittingly. Such a deference to the feelings of the disadvantaged segments of the society is expected. Secondly, the traders and the business people could undergo self-examination as to whether they participated in fair business practices to spread their profits through larger volumes of transactions. Then there is the emphasis on safe home coming and return of the people who have been on the move.

Today, we renew our resolve to strive harder to build an egalitarian society, foster greater tolerance of each others' views and work for a stronger democratic society based on peace, prosperity and human dignity. We share our happiness, in celebration and in prayer, with our readers and people everywhere. Eid Mubarak to all.

Highway policing

It must be beefed up to be of good use

IN times like this, when there is a glut of vehicular traffic on the highways carrying home goers to various parts of the country to enjoy the holidays, does one feel the absence of a well organised highway police outfit even more. The present state of the highway police gives it little capacity to perform its assigned tasks.

Needless to say, much of the mishaps on the major highways including highway robberies, some done in broad daylight, and clogging of highways due to accidents, could have been avoided and road journey made safer had we an adequately manned and equipped force capable of exercising effective supervision on the entire stretch of the inter district roads in the country.

Bangladesh has perhaps the highest rate of highway road accidents as well as the highest rate of fatal casualties compared to the length of the highway, and it perhaps has the highest volume of traffic per mile of highway. And given the quality of our drivers, most of who possess fake driver's license, and the conditions of the roads, they both combine to make road journey a most hazardous undertaking. And without strict supervision of the law enforcing agencies it becomes an even more dangerous proposition.

It has been more than four years since the highway patrol was established. And it is not an easy task to exercise oversight over a stretch of nearly 12000 kilometers of highways. And we understand that with the constraints that we have to live with it is not possible to have the optimum level of resources in all the areas of the force overnight.

We suggest that the police administration take action to plug the loopholes right away. While the duality in command and control should be done away with immediately, the arrangements must be made to provide highway police with the necessary human resources and technical and logistic support on priority basis. But even that will take time. In the meanwhile, the current situation calls for sound utilisation of available resources which can be done by prioritising the areas and the tasks, because, in trying to be everywhere the highway patrol is being nowhere actually.

Let us not forget the countryside

If the village has no work to provide to its adult and able population and a city has more job-seekers than it can handle, then that is the worst kind of predicament for the nation

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

ALL through last week, homebound people left the capital city in droves to celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr in their country homes. And how the capital as well as other bigger cities of Bangladesh depend on the countryside for their nerve and sparkle one can understand on such big socio-religious occasions such as Eid. Though the city's older residents often curse the influx of fresh invaders from the districts who are responsible for its ever-swelling population, its intolerable traffic jams and everything that annoys them, it is also the people from the countryside that keep the city going. The city-ward migrants who swarm the slums and the footpaths are not purely an object of vexation, for they also supply the factories, the households and the markets with their necessary workforce. The expanding city needs enough working hands and the migrants their work. So, they both serve one another. Ideally, the relationship between the city and the rural backyard should have been mutually

beneficial, a win-win one. Unfortunately, in the case of the capital and other big cities of Bangladesh, it is rather a lose-lose situation as it is also destroying the demographic and ecological balance of the cities.

It is not only the impoverished people who are racing towards the cities in growing numbers in search of livelihood. Members of the section of society belonging to the middle class and lower middle class, youths in particular, are also joining the ranks of the army of semi-employed and unemployed multitude.

The city-bound march of rural migrants is getting longer and wider by the day. The reason as everyone knows is that there are fewer opportunities of work back home in the villages. As a consequence, the villages, which were once self-sufficient, are losing their attraction, while the cities and towns, big or small, are bursting at the seams with more people than they are able to support, far less provide them with work.

If the village has no work to provide to its adult and able population and a city

has more job-seekers than it can handle, then that is the worst kind of predicament for the nation. Because, it is rendering both the city and the country poorer.

This process of pauperisation of the countryside and the swelling of the cities at their expense has been going on for long. The capital in particular has been absorbing the lion's share of the city bound migrants. The situation has reached explosive proportions a long time back.

It is not that the government and all others concerned are not worried about this development. They apparently are, though, nothing of consequence has so far been done to reverse this dangerous trend.

Of late the authorities have become more concerned with the city's traffic jams. Naturally, ideas are being floated to resolve this problem through various novel means. Creation of more traffic space through efficient management of the traffic load among the different kinds of road users according to priority may be one of the ways under the given conditions. Construction of more flyovers is on the agenda. Ideas like introduction of new kinds of transport services such as monorails, sky trains and metro rail service are also doing the rounds. These are undoubtedly cost-intensive projects. But for a

modern city like Dhaka, one will have to go for such options, today or tomorrow. To deny this would be tantamount to saying that one does not want progress.

We are certainly for progress. But what kind of progress have we so far been craving and at what cost? We have been making the cities more glamorous at the expense of countryside. The capital city of Dhaka, for example, houses not only the administrative headquarters, but also the major businesses and the industries. But all these could well be distributed over different parts of the country, thereby reducing all the pressure on a single spot like the capital city.

Progress does not consist only in building big concrete and metallic behemoths in the cities. On the contrary, the condition of progress is better reflected through the faces of people beaming with happiness, who are healthy, better clothed, have work, protected by a roof over their head and whose children can go to school.

To make bigger cities more liveable, it will be necessary to transfer some of its resources to the countryside. That will go a long way towards resolving the major problems the big cities are now facing as well as help addressing some of economic ills of the country including its poverty.

Syed Fattahul Alim is a senior journalist.

Resource for national development

Mutual respect must be the essential glue for building a knowledge and information bridge. What we need is synergy between PBO professionals, academics and members of the creative class with their counterparts in Bangladesh.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

RICHARD Florida, a well-known American academic has developed the concept of "creative class." Florida has emphasised the role of this class in economic development in a competitive environment, especially in the age of knowledge-based economy. In a globalised world, the creative class has also become highly mobile.

The success of creating a knowledge-based economy depends to a great extent on the ability to nurture the creative class and, when possible, to bring them from elsewhere. Here, nations that have a diasporic population have an advantage. If Bangladesh has to enter the digital age, as the prime minister aspires, Bangladesh must tap the creative class both in Bangladesh as well as overseas.

How many Bangladeshis comprise the diaspora? The estimates vary from 6.3 million to 9 million. The figures are, at best, estimates but there is no doubt that it is a significant number. This group can be classified broadly into two sub-groups: non-resident Bangladeshis who are Bangladeshis citizens but are currently

living outside Bangladesh and those who will return at the end of their tenure of work overseas.

People of Bangladeshi origin are those who can trace their ancestry to a Bangladeshi citizen, or who may have been born in Bangladesh and have taken up citizenship in another country. In other words, they are people, who are ethnically Bengalis, or have families in Bangladesh but are currently citizens of other countries.

Bangladeshi origin people often play important roles in their adopted homes. Many of them are successful entrepreneurs, professionals, educators, physicians, scientists, engineers, architects and so on, and have gained international experience. They can play an important role in the development of Bangladesh, either by investing their wealth or building an educational and scientific bridge between their adopted countries and Bangladesh.

In the globalised world, many of us have two identities. One can be a Canadian by juridical citizenship and Bangladeshi by cultural citizenship. Global processes have created multiple identities, which

most people can deal with effortlessly. For example, in the usage of language, most Bangladeshis in the diaspora are at ease in separating work language (English, German, French, Arabic etc.) from home language, which is Bengali. They can make valuable contributions to the much-needed foreign language requirements of their ancestral home.

In the 1990s, when India took the relatively free-market, open economy track, it began to woo some of the rich overseas Indians for investments following what the Chinese did in their bid to attract cash, technology and knowhow from the overseas Chinese. Overseas Chinese played a huge role in the economic growth in China since the late 1970s, when Deng Xiaoping introduced economic reforms.

There are Bangladeshi scientists and professors, physicians and bankers who could play a significant role in transforming Bangladesh into a Digital Bangladesh. The initiatives must come from both directions. Persons of Bangladeshi origin can offer their expertise and share their knowledge.

There are Bangladeshi physicians in the United States who want to return to Bangladesh in summer to run free clinics. What we need is an institutional mechanism through which we can match their skills with the needs of Bangladesh.

The private universities have taken a leading role in creating opportunities for the overseas Bangladeshis to teach and conduct research in Bangladesh. Some universities have been successful in

bringing back some highly qualified Bangladeshi academics from overseas.

Public institutions can establish a knowledge-bridge between Bangladeshi academic institutions and their counterparts overseas, where persons of Bangladeshi origin can play an effective role. Hospitals can also establish links so that they can benefit from the expertise of the doctors of Bangladeshi origin currently working in hospitals abroad.

While I am emphasising the likely contribution persons of Bangladeshi origin may make to the development of Bangladesh, I am not minimising for a moment the role of the well-qualified professionals and the creative class domiciled in Bangladesh, many of whom are of international caliber. Sadly, some PBOs fail to recognise that, and often paint a bleak picture of their homeland. It is time for unity, not divisiveness.

Mutual respect must be the essential glue for building a knowledge and information bridge. What we need is synergy between PBO professionals, academics and members of the creative class with their counterparts in Bangladesh.

I hope the government of Bangladesh will come forward to create conditions and opportunities for tapping the resourceful persons of Bangladeshi origin to achieve the goal of sustainable national development.

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Tackling corruption electronically

Politicians cannot challenge vested consumer and producer interests for fear of losing votes, lobby and media support, and associated funding. This makes democracies incapable of mobilising citizens to tackle collective action problems on a big scale -- above all, climate disruption and the need for deep emission cuts."

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

OF late, involvement of ruling party functionaries in the manipulation of tenders for governmental projects has become an embarrassment for the government. More so as the party activists are not listening to the advice of the prime minister that they should refrain from doing so.

In addition, political muscle allegedly being used by the ruling party leaders, including some members of parliament, in land grabbing and other illegal acts is clouding the good deeds of the government.

These acts have goaded the government to go for e-tendering from next June. If this materialises then some of the corruption enveloping all sectors of the economy would be contained.

Tender manipulation and consequent violence can be categorised as corruption if we define the term as:

- Violation of social rules and norms;
- Secret exchange among political, social and economic markets;
- Illegal access given to individuals and groups to the process of political and administrative decision making; and
- Resultant tangible benefits to the parties involved in the transaction.

By any definition, corruption is illegal and, in the first instance, results from collusion between politicians and the elite. The first party abuses public position of trust for private gains of both parties.

During the BNP-Jamaat rule, two country directors of the World Bank in Bangladesh were candid enough to publicly point out collusive theft by the employees in the power sector and the consumers; port inefficiencies costing over \$1 billion a year; governance problems and inefficiency in the banking sector, slowing down GDP growth over one percent per annum; Tk.30-40 cores of public procurement lost every year due to corruption.

Giving a detailed analysis one country director concluded that Bangladesh was losing 2-3% GDP growth a year due to corruption. His successor was more circumspect, yet no less pointed in her assessment of then governmental inadequacies holding up growth rate of our economy.

With the Third Wave of democracy in the former Eastern Europe and Bush Junior's ill-conceived promotion of democracy irrespective of different political, economic and socio-cultural norms existing in different countries, the then US administration was convinced that the

promotion of autocracy dictated by the Cold War was faulty. Besides, some political scientists and economists were doubtful that all nations were ready to embrace democracy as the concept is generally understood.

Gavin Kiching was pessimistic about poor societies producing sustainable democratic life essential for the creation of socialist democracy.

So are Francis Fukuyama, Joseph Stiglitz, Milton Friedman and some others. Ian Christie has been more outspoken. He writes: "Democracy poses huge problems for sustainable development. In the advanced liberal capitalist states, democracy is tightly coupled to the promise of economic growth, ever-rising consumption and individual freedom. Democracy in such states now entrenches the interests of the affluent majority and well-funded lobbies in the political system. Representative democracies have become sclerotic and there is a widespread problem of public trust and apathy in the OECD world. Politicians cannot challenge vested consumer and producer interests for fear of losing votes, lobby and media support, and associated funding. This makes democracies incapable of mobilising citizens to tackle collective action problems on a big scale -- above all, climate disruption and the need for deep emission cuts."

Neo-con Joshua Muravchik criticised President Obama for scaling down George W. Bush's missionary zeal for democratisation of all countries in his discussion with the editors of the Washington Post on the eve of his inauguration that democracy was less important than "freedom from want, and freedom from fear."

If people aren't secure, if people are

starving, then elections may or may not address those issues, but they are not a perfect overlay." But developing countries in general, and Bangladesh is no exception, invariably opt for democracy despite imperfection in their practice.

Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan has predicted that another global financial crisis is inevitable due to "unquenchable capability of human beings when confronted with a long period of prosperity to presume that it will continue." Nobel laureate Edmund Phelps feels that the massive debt incurred by the US to halt recession will thwart growth for decades and will also fuel inflation.

Our fate is inextricably linked with the global economy, particularly with that of the West. But our government, surprisingly, is giving Tk.1,800 cores stimulus to our exporters. "Stimulus" has become a buzz-word among BMW/ Mercedes Benz driving entrepreneurs, while the common people cannot make both ends meet. If Phelps and Greenspan prove to be correct then this "stimulus" will not only increase in size this fiscal but may have no end.

It is not clear how much of the stimulus being promised to the rich and the powerful, who have denied the government its due taxes and have personalised the gains and socialised the losses, will benefit the farmers and labourers who constitute the back bone of the economy. The government may wish to focus on the agricultural sector that provides 30% of the GDP and manpower training to send skilled and semi-skilled manpower abroad, and give easy loans to SMEs to create domestic demand -- thus giving real meaning to the promises made to the people before the election.

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