

The spirit of Eid-ul-Fitr

Let us uphold the values of peace and tolerance

AFTER Ramadan, the month of fasting has come the Eid-ul-Fitr for the Muslims all over the world. People left the capital city as well as other the divisional headquarters for their village homes to reunite with near and dear ones and join in the festivities of Eid together. This is the day when the Muslims reward themselves for having successfully observed the month of self-restraint when they deny themselves foods, drinks and all forms of bodily pleasure and self-indulgence during the daytime. This is also an occasion when Muslims forget the past days of ill-will and hostility towards their rivals and enemies and embrace them after saying the prayer in congregation.

So, the Eid is not merely a day of feasting and making merry. It is also the day of spiritual regeneration and rebirth for the Muslims. In the present-day context, there is room for serious introspection for the Muslims everywhere. Are the Muslims celebrating the occasion as a mere ritual or are they doing it in its real spirit? The question arises once we look at the day-to-day happenings in the countries where the Muslim populations are predominant. Senseless bloodshed, suicide bomb attacks on mosques during the prayers, gunning down marchers in a religious procession or driving suicide car-bombs into the gathering of Muslims belonging to different sects have become the stuff of news in the media. The irony is that all these are happening in the name of Islam. But Islam never allows such killings and suicide attacks by a Muslim on another Muslim or people belonging to other faiths. On the contrary, Islam teaches the faithful to be sensible, tolerant and understanding.

In this sense, this Eid-ul-Fitr has again provided us with another occasion for soul-searching. On this day of reunion, the Muslim community must again ask themselves if they are following the true path of Islam, the faith of peace and tolerance.

Talking of tolerance and patience, it must be admitted that we, in Bangladesh in particular, need to exercise more of these gifts of character during the Eid. The mad rush and stampede that are a common experience during the journey home often lead to tragic accidents on the roads and waterways every year. And these recurring tragedies have robbed the victims and their families of all the joy of the Eid-reunion forever. If they had exercised restraint and patience, they need not have to suffer these heartbreaks.

On this occasion of Eid-ul-fitr, we hope those journeying home and back would exercise caution and avoid risking their valuable lives by jumping into the overcrowded buses, trains and river vessels.

Happy Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid Mubarak to all.

Commitment to literacy

It awaits fulfillment

INTERNATIONAL Literacy Day, observed rather ritualistically, is a grim reminder of the country's underperformance in this sector. It is bad news that even after 40 years of independence the country has around 3.73 crore people who cannot read or write. True, the literacy rate has gone up from a measly 16 percent in 1971 to a more respectable 53 percent in 2009, but the improvement is still nowhere near the expected level.

This year's theme for observing the day was "Literacy and Women's empowerment". Obviously, functional literacy has a great bearing on socio-economic change and this is particularly true about women in rural Bangladesh who are lagging behind. So, there should be special emphasis on women's literacy if we want to ensure a level playing field for all.

The government is now launching two special projects Basic Literacy and Continuing Education (project 1 and 2) at a huge cost of taka 3,000 crore to inject life into the literacy drive. A similar project, Total Literacy Movement, was introduced in 1996 as part of the plan to supplement the literacy campaign. But it was later abandoned by the BNP government which brought allegations of irregularities and mismanagement against the project managers.

Whatever might be the rationale behind the BNP government's decision, it is evident that such projects suffer when a new regime takes over. Clearly, projects initiated by the previous government are viewed with suspicion, even when it comes to a crucially important sector like education. Project-based operations seem to be inadequate for other reasons also. Such projects exist for a specific period of time, but a literacy drive should be a continual process.

Experts, therefore, are not convinced that the projects designed to augment the literacy drive are attaining their objectives. A former education adviser to a caretaker government has suggested that the drive be made a part of mainstream education, pointing out the limitations of the project-based approach. She laid much emphasis on long-term planning to eliminate illiteracy.

We share her views since the literacy drive cannot be a short-term affair, given the harsh truth that such a staggering number of people are still illiterate. However, it is also imperative that the projects initiated by a government are not terminated by its successor only on political grounds. A broader consensus among the major parties is needed to further streamline the literacy drive.

9/11 and our responsibility for waging peace

The West can significantly help the process by reorientation of its foreign policies and resolution of the outstanding international issues of conflict involving Arab-Israel, Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya and other flash points of conflict. The focus has to shift from seeking a military solution to such conflicts to diplomacy and negotiations to address the core issues underlying such conflicts.

S.M. RASHED AHMED

THE attack on 9/11 was truly a tragedy of historic proportions in many ways. It was on this day that a group of terrorists bombed the World Trade Center, killing, maiming and wounding around 300 innocent US civilians, and changed the equation in critical ways. "America at War" became the rallying cry of the US government and people.

US civilians were exposed to the risk of outside attack from a faceless enemy in the name of Islam. And to arouse the real fear of US non-Muslim citizens about Islam the attack shrewdly and calculatedly targeted the key elements of US power -- the World Trade Center, which symbolises the might of US economic power; the Pentagon -- the symbol of US military might; and the US Capitol building -- the symbol of US democracy.

Much has been written on the possible motives and conspiracy theories surrounding the attack. I, however, feel that instead of getting into a futile and even counter-productive debate about this tragedy it is of crucial importance for us to realise that the attack of 9/11 unleashed unprecedented fear of Islam and Muslims, not only amongst non-Muslims, not only in US, but around the globe, giving birth to the "Islamophobia" currently sweeping the West.

This has seriously affected the relationship between the Muslim world and the West, where a significant number of Muslims live, and has been compounded by the rise of the neo-cons, religious intolerance and the retaliatory invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The current controversy surrounding the construction of the so-called mosque -- project Park 51 on ground zero -- is a manifestation of this new phenomenon. It is neither a mosque project nor on ground zero. It is basically an Islamic cultural project for promoting interfaith understanding, which was overwhelming approved by an advisory board consisting of Muslims, Christians and Jews.

It was conceived by Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf an internationally respected Muslim scholar living in the US who has dedicated his life to promoting interfaith understanding. I have the honour of knowing him personally. He is proud to be both, a Muslim and an American, as he strongly believes that US ideals of democracy, pluralism, tolerance, individual rights, liberty and justice as embodied in the US constitution coincide with the Islamic ideals which were practiced in the days of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and saw the finest flowering of Islamic civilisation in Spain

during 800-1200 CE, characterised by the richness of art, culture, philosophy and science.

When Muslims ruled Spain, many Jewish and Christian artists and intellectuals flocked to Cordova to escape the oppressive regimes that reigned over Europe's Dark middle ages. Notably among others, great Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides worked freely to produce their historic works within the liberal and pluralistic culture of Islam.

Prince Charles in his address at the Oxford University and President Obama in his Cairo address, among others, acknowledged the contribution of Islamic civilisation to the renaissance in Europe.

After the 13th century onwards, Islamic civilisation reached a plateau and then gradually went into a decline, while European and Western civilisation entered the age of enlightenment and progress. The plight of the Muslims was further compounded by the crusade and colonialism, which saw an unprecedented decline of Muslims in all areas, most significantly in education and intellectual fields, coinciding with their political decline.

It is not necessary or possible to go in-depth into the impact of this turn around in the fortunes of the two civilisations, which form the background of much of today's dysfunctional relationship between the Muslim world and the West.

What is of relevance is to concentrate and bend all our energies to bridge the unacceptable divide between Muslim world and the West, which is in the interest of both for achieving a peaceful, equitable and democratic world order based on human rights, freedom and dignity.

The ideals of democracy and pluralism for Muslim countries in particular cannot be imposed from outside or through use of force, as experience shows. It is an evolutionary process and the Muslim world and the West will have to work collectively through peaceful means to achieve this shared vision and objective.

I will briefly touch on what I feel are the responsibilities of the Muslims living in the West as well as outside in this historic process of bridging the breach between Islam and the West. Instead of finding fault and even scapegoats for our lack of progress in achieving liberal democratic societies, and economic, educational and intellectual progress, we should start with internal purification and serious reform of our societies.

Today, most of the Muslim societies are backward and totally dependent on the West for all their needs. Even to acquire knowledge and intellectual pursuit of our own religion Islam we have to go to the



A world shattering event.

West, particularly, USA, UK, Germany, French, Japan etc. Not to speak of acquiring knowledge of science and technology. This speaks of the state of our decay.

To get out of this rut we will need to commit ourselves seriously to the process of building democracy and democratic institutions characterised, inter alia, by free media, freedom of expression, impartial judiciary, neutral civil service, rights of the minority and the vulnerable section of the society, full government support to private enterprise, education, health and employment with topmost priority to education for all. "No child should go to bed hungry and no child should be without education" should be the bedrock of our development plan and eradication poverty.

Democracy, to be sustainable, requires, among others, a functioning parliament, tolerance of dissent, an opposition something akin to Her Majesty's Opposition, rule of law; zero tolerance for corruption, and above all good governance backed by an active civil society. These are, to my mind, some of the essential prerequisites for institutionalising democracy and democratic practice as a way of life.

In the context of Bangladesh, given its history characterised by repeated failure of political process, we need to achieve minimum consensus between the government and the opposition on key domestic and foreign policies issues for uninterrupted development of democracy and democratic practice.

The West can significantly help the process by reorientation of its foreign policies and resolution of the outstanding international issues of conflict involving Arab-Israel, Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya and other flash points of conflict. The focus has to shift from seeking a military solution to such conflicts to diplomacy and negotiations to address the core issues underlying such conflicts.

The huge savings which would result from eventual withdrawal of troops from foreign countries and decreased military expenditure should be diverted for wining the hearts and minds of the people by

meeting the critical development needs of the people in Muslim countries. This should be followed by vigorous public diplomacy and interfaith dialogue at all levels, and greater people to people contact and exchanges. Formal diplomacy should be supported by Track II diplomacy.

I am aware of the formidable challenges for bridging the growing chasm between Islam and West for achieving a harmonious and mutually friendly relationship. We have no option but to try and succeed by mobilising political will and exploring all possible avenues to achieve the goal. Failure to do so will be catastrophic to both and to world peace and stability.

To quote Wilfred Cantwell Smith: "A healthy, functioning Islam is crucial for world peace because for centuries it helped Muslims cultivate values and ideals that we in the West also share, because they spring from a common tradition. Muslims must learn to accommodate the West and not fall prey to the lure of extremist rejection of Western power. But the peoples of the West must also realise that they share the planet not with inferiors but with equals. If they fail both will have failed to come to terms with the actualities of the this century."

I wish to conclude with a poem by Sheikh Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi, one of the greatest Sufi masters, which can form the basis of new humanity and humanism embodied in all religions,

"There was a time when I took it amiss in my companion if his

Religion was not near to mine;

But now my heart takes on every form; it is a pasture for gazelles,

A monastery for monks,

A temple for the tables of the Torah, a Ka'bah for pilgrims and

The holy book of the Quran.

Love is my religion, and whichever way its riding beasts turn, that way lies my religion and belief."

S.M. Rashed Ahmed is a former UN Regional Administrator/Representative in Kosovo and former Bangladesh Ambassador to Japan.

Coordinating agricultural research

It is hoped that the present government will, for coordination of agri-research, take science and technology and the Ministry of Education (or perhaps the University Grants Commission) under its fold. Only then can we expect to see an all-encompassing and substantial development in this area.

HASEENA KHAN

THE history of developed and developing countries in recent times has long-established that science and technology is the central link that bonds the various sectors of the national economies such as agriculture, health, education, commerce and industry, environment, etc.

Undeniably, science and technology is the engine which, through research and development activities, drives the potentials within these sectors, be it product development, development of pilot plants or commercialisation of research results amongst others.

That the present government realises the importance of science and technology in national development and is keen to help Bangladesh function successfully in a knowledge-based, globalised economy is reflected in remarks made by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on many an occasion. The reflection is also there when we notice the swiftness with which her government executed the jute genome sequencing project.

Many of her ministers are just as keen in this regard.

The jute genome sequencing was possible not only because of the quick release of necessary funds but also because our

agriculture minister, Begum Motia Chowdhury, felt so strongly and passionately about the importance of the project and was proactive in ensuring its smooth execution.

Sheikh Hasina is even aware of the fact that research scientists with a passion for science should not be confined within the age limit for serving in government research institutes. She knows that there are scientists who even past their retirement age have the potential to enrich science. Thus, we find her reiterating in many meetings that there should not be any age bar for scientists and that they should be allowed to work as long as they are able to contribute to the promotion of science.

All this is heartening to note for some of us striving for long to enthuse a research culture in this country and to imbibe into our bright young generation the necessity of research. It is very encouraging and reassuring to say the least to see the great importance the present government is attaching to scientific research.

We also remember with gratitude the exceptional increase in research funds that was made available through the Ministry of Science and Technology during Sheikh Hasina's last tenure. I take this opportunity to thank Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir who we understand had seen the necessity for

increasing science and technology funds from the pitiable amount then allocated for research. Through one such capacity development grant from the Ministry of Science and Technology I had been able to initiate research on jute molecular biology. This pioneering work on jute later set the stage for jute genome sequencing.

Against this backdrop, I refer with great surprise to a news item published in The Daily Star on August 31. According to the news, Sheikh Hasina's cabinet had taken a decision on August 30 that "three separate ministries, agriculture, commerce and jute, should coordinate work in boosting up the country's agricultural research, especially in rice and jute." Why only these three ministries? This is indeed baffling!

What about the Ministry of Science Information and Communication Technology and the research institutes under this ministry? The National Institute of Biotechnology (NIB) under the ministry of Science and Technology is, as the name implies, the mandated institute for biotechnology and anyone knowledgeable of recent developments in agricultural science will appreciate the role biotechnology has played in such development. According to the objectives of NIB, agricultural biotechnology forms a very big part.

There is a task force on biotechnology which is headed by the prime minister herself. The member secretary of this task force is the minister, science and technology. This task force coordinates and oversees the activities of various technical committees on biotechnology, of which agriculture biotechnology receives the most importance.

Then there are other institutions like the Bangladesh Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) and

Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC). They also carry out agriculture research. Why then is the S&T ministry not part of the ministries coordinating agricultural research?

The present government's stand on science and technology appears to be contradictory. They insist on the importance of research in national development but then we do not see a full minister in charge of this ministry. And then they decide to leave the science and technology ministry out of agriculture research coordinating committees.

It is also well known that research and development are carried out primarily at the universities. Therefore, when it comes to research coordination, be it agriculture research or not, the ministry of education cannot be ignored. This ministry has under its fold all the public universities, including the various agriculture universities. Research discoveries made at some of these universities have impacted positively on agricultural development in Bangladesh.

As pointed out earlier science and technology funding to my laboratory at the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, University of Dhaka had helped to initiate research at the molecular level on jute, which later played a big role in the initiation of jute genome sequencing.

It is hoped that the present government will, for coordination of agri-research, take science and technology and the Ministry of Education (or perhaps the University Grants Commission) under its fold. Only then can we expect to see an all-encompassing and substantial development in this area.

Haseena Khan is Professor, Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, University of Dhaka.