

Eid-ul-fitr: A festival with a difference



Eid does not mean only celebration.

Eid-ul-Fitr indeed is no ordinary festival. It is a festival with a difference. It has a definite purpose, a norm to convey, a lesson to teach. None of us can afford to celebrate this extraordinary occasion through extravagance and prodigality, through unbridled fun and frolic, through gaudy and expensive dresses, through spectacular functions and feasts.

SYED ASHRAF ALI

EID-UL-FITR is celebrated as a day of joy and happiness, fun and frolic, pleasure and gaiety in every nook and corner of the Muslim world. "Eid" in Arabic means joy and "fitr" means return to normalcy. Though it was Eid-ul-fitr, the great Caliph Omar bin Khattab (RA) was weeping like a child -- the man whose "walking stick," in the words of Emerson, "struck more terror into those who saw it than another

man's sword," was weeping and trembling like a lamb ready for slaughter. No ordinary man was Caliph Omar. A giant among men, with unbelievable courage, indomitable spirit, unshakable conviction and incomparable dedication, as he was, no earthly fear or danger could cow down Omar. Many a battle had he fought, many a crisis had he faced, many a storm had he weathered, many a danger had he tided over, but never had this colossus among men felt or wavered, never even for a

moment had he felt nervous or shaky, not to speak of weeping or trembling in fear.

Omar was the undisputed leader of a vast empire and yet, in the words of the same Emerson, "his diet was barley bread, his sauce was salt; and oftentimes, by way of abstinence, he ate his bread without salt. His drink was water. His palace was built of mud; when he left Medina to go to the conquest of Jerusalem, he rode on a red camel with a wooden platter hanging at its saddle, with a bottle of water and two sacks, one holding barley and the other dried fruit."

That is not all. Even the Khatamun Nabiyeen Hazrat Muhammad (peace be upon him), according to many a reliable authority, claimed that if there were any Prophet after him, it would be Omar bin Khattab (RA). But even such an illustrious man was weeping on the auspicious day of joy and happiness.

What was it that he was afraid of? He was weeping simply because he was not sure whether his Siyam in the preceding holy month of Ramadhan had been accepted by Allah, because he was not sure whether he would be able to avail himself of the glorious

and coveted chance of receiving Divine Mercy and Reward directly from Benign Providence, because he was one of the few who knew well that the joy of Eid-ul-fitr is not meant for one and all -- it is meant only for those who had practiced Siyam in the true spirit of Islam through Taqwa and Tarawwi during the auspicious month of Ramadhan.

Eid-ul-Fitr indeed is no ordinary festival. The joy it brings is a joy with a difference, a joy meant for only a handful of persons -- persons who had undertaken the arduous task of practicing restraint and abstinence in the right kiln of Islam.

For those who did not bother to practice Siyam in the month of Ramadhan, the

new moon of Shawal, augmenting the advent of Eid-ul-fitr, brings no joy or happiness at all in the eyes of Islam. To them Eid-ul-fitr is a day of lamentation, a day of sorrow, and certainly not a day of "return to normalcy." Eid-ul-fitr indeed is a festival with a difference.

It may be mentioned in this connection that Siyam does not merely mean fasting from dawn to dusk. Al-Siyam is something more significant, something more difficult, comprising much wider dimensions than mere fasting. The word "Ramzan" is derived from the word "Ramz," which means "to burn," "to scorch;" the root meaning of "Ramzan" means excessiveness of heat.

Fasting in Islam means to refrain and abstain, from dawn till sunset, from various things forbidden by Islamic law. In the eyes of Islam, Al-Siyam stands for an institution for the moral uplift and spiritual elevation of the human soul. It helps us overcome lust and greed and hatred, and thereby sets us at the mouth of the road leading to perfection to be achieved not through self-torture, not through mere abstinence from food and drink and sex, but through Taqwa and Tarawwi, contemplation and acts of charity, total restraint on and abstinence from all evil acts and thoughts, all unholy dreams and desires.

Such a noble act of piety militates against extravagances like sumptuous iftar parties or colossal wastage in the name of religion. Any ostentation of this kind certainly negates the core spirit of Islam, which is basically one of abnegation of temptation and yet an abundance of spiritual fulfillment.

Taqwa, essentially, is a function of the heart and a voluntary effort comprising the elements of caution, alertness and fear of Allah. The holy Prophet (pbuh) used to point to his chest saying: "Here is the seat of Taqwa." Al-Siyam indeed is a

glorious opportunity unparalleled by any act of piety of worship. According to a Qudsi Hadith (utterances attributed to Allah outside the Holy Quran), the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah says: "Every man's work belongs to him. A good deed is repaid from ten-fold to seven hundred times. Fasting belongs to Me and I repay."

The very sighting of the much-awaited new moon in the month of Shawwal, bringing to an end the month-long period of fasting during Ramzan, therefore, brings for the Muslims the coveted and unique opportunity to offer heart-felt gratitude to Allah for kindly permitting them to receive Divine Mercy and Blessing directly from Him. It is this promise of joy and happiness on the 1st of Shawwal, the tenth month in the Arabic calendar, heralding the advent of "return to normalcy" together with an auspicious day of thanksgiving which is known as Eid-ul-fitr.

What is more, the month of Ramzan is not only Shahrul Azimun, but it is also described by the holy Prophet (pbuh) as Shahrul Muassa, or the month of fellow-feeling, the month in which each and every Muslim should feel and work for the welfare of his or her friends and relatives and neighbours. For Islam is not a religion only guaranteeing the betterment and uplift of an individual's private and personal life. Nor is it a religion comprising some dogmas, rituals and customs. It is an organised, disciplined, scientific and complete way of life which guides men according to the dictates of Almighty Allah and the teachings of his holy Prophet (pbuh).

If that be the true picture of Eid-ul-fitr, there is nothing surprising that even a salt of the earth like Caliph Omar could be found weeping on an Eid-ul-fitr, because he knew not whether he would be able to receive the much-awaited and

coveted Mercy and Blessing directly from the Almighty. For him there simply could be no charm or joy or happiness on an Eid-ul-fitr if he had failed to avail himself of the rare opportunity of receiving reward directly from Benign Providence.

If a towering personality like Omar was not sure of his right to enjoy the "joy" of Eid-ul-fitr, can ordinary persons like you and me be sure and sanguine that Eid-ul-Fitr brings for us a day of pleasure and joy and happiness? Where Omar trembles, can lesser mortals like us remain unnerved?

Eid-ul-Fitr indeed is no ordinary festival. It is a festival with a difference. It has a definite purpose, a norm to convey, a lesson to teach. None of us can afford to celebrate this extraordinary occasion through extravagance and prodigality, through unbridled fun and frolic, through gaudy and expensive dresses, through spectacular functions and feasts.

There can indeed be no Eid-ul-Fitr or any festival in Islam if we forget the unity of mankind under one banner, the universal brotherhood of man, with no distinction between black and white, rich and poor, wise and ignorant, king and slave. There can be no Eid if we cannot forget the artificial differences between haves and have-nots.

What is more, there can be no Eid if we fail to feed the hungry destitute, if we fail to cater to the needs of the poverty-stricken multitude. There simply can be no Eid if genuine attempts are not made to feed each and every hungry mouth, to clothe each and every nude, to ensure that the poor and helpless relatives and neighbours and friends are not left unwept, unhonoured and unsung.

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Please do not ban books -- not even the ugliest

To support ban on books - any book - is to support the idea that governments can decide which book people should or should not read. That idea impinges on the fundamental right of the individual to read whatever he or she might like to read.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

THE news item barely made it to the print media. Several weeks ago The Daily Star reported that the government "has removed all books written by alleged war criminals and people involved in preaching [the] ideology of Maududi ... from all countrywide libraries based in mosques and others run by the Islamic Foundation", the government sponsored organisation. The news report was brief, crowded by a throng of other matters. Indeed there was a lot to report on. There was the just announced government budget, a spike in crime rates, the war crimes trial, turmoil in the garments industry, falling buildings and blazing fires, murderous feuding in the Chhatra League, and the endless antics of national political leaders.

The Jamaat-e-Islami protested the government's decision. The BBC carried the news. As usual nowadays, exchanges over the issue on the internet probably far outnumbered those in the print media. Yet, on the whole, reaction to the news, as far as it could be gauged, was mute.

There could be a number of reasons why the news was received with relative silence. This was not a total 'ban' on books written by Abul A'la Maududi or those inspired by his writings. A 'ban' normally means prohibition on the production, sale, and possession of the targeted book, which apparently was not the case here. Not that a total ban would have

caused a commotion. We as a nation are quite attuned to book banning. A second reason might have been the way the government's decision to remove the books was made public: the state minister for religious affairs announced it in reply to a question in parliament during question hour. Given the unenviable esteem in which parliament is held by the public and politicians alike, it was no surprise that the information provided by the minister in parliament received so little attention.

All was not quiet, however. There was some debate, especially on the internet. But the little noise that broke the silence is almost as disturbing as the silence itself. Voices were raised in support of the ban. And they came from secularists and liberals, among them individuals whose views on the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism I mostly share.

Much of the support for the ban seemed to come from the argument that Maududi's books preach fundamentalist Islam, call for establishment of an Islamic state based on the Sharia, and incite violence against the secular order to achieve their objective. Maududi's stance on the Islamic state is well known. His Islamic scholarship has been questioned, but his books are read, and his writings have stirred minds, especially in Pakistan and lately in Bangladesh. There is also little doubt about the brand of Islam he and his political party, the Jamaat-e-Islami, preached in Pakistan. There is no

ambiguity about his goal: the setting up of an Islamic state based on the Sharia. The extremism of his ideology was exemplified in his violent opposition to the Ahmadiyyas. He was instrumental in bringing about the 1953 uprising in Lahore that led to a massacre of the Ahmadiyyas of the city. The political regime at the time was still tainted by fundamentalist Islam. It imposed martial law and suppressed the anti-Ahmadiyya uprising with iron hand. Maududi was put on trial and sentenced to death but the sentence was not carried out.

There is also support for banning books written by Islamist who opposed the creation of Bangladesh among them those who are said to have committed war crimes during the country's liberation struggle. Many of those who were opposed to the emergence of Bangladesh are said to belong to Jamaat-e-Islami. But the ideology of the Jamaat has helped spawn a host of Islamist activism under different umbrellas. I am not familiar with the kind of writings these groups might be indulging in, but do not rule out the existence of considerable literature of low quality and high potency.

It is, however, one thing to decry an ideology and wish it were not there; it is quite another to try to shut it out. In a truly secular nation it is tempting to ban books that advocate the setting up of a fundamentalist Islamic state. It is doubly tempting if such a state is sought to be established by violence. In both cases the urge should be tempered.

To support ban on books - any book - is to support the idea that governments can decide which book people should or should not read. That idea impinges on the fundamental right of the individual to read whatever he or she might like to read. This is part of the freedom of thought that lies at



Banning books is banning knowledge.

the very heart of secular democracy that the present proponents of the ban claim to uphold. To abridge that right is to kill it.

A truly secular and democratic government would be acting from a position of strength and not weakness if it refused to ban books that fall foul of its ideology. Equally important, such refusal would strengthen its hands when it came to defending works that uphold secularism and democratic rights and are critical of religious fundamentalism of all kinds. A tradition of refusal to ban books could be the strongest citadel of defence against the very books that threaten secularism and whose ban is being supported by some secularists today.

Am I perhaps asking for the moon? There is precious little evidence that healthy traditions are taking root in the country. Here, political parties, when not

in power, routinely boycott parliament instead of sitting in it in active opposition; in this country leaders of major political parties find it excruciatingly difficult to swallow private spite to promote public good; here no minister of government ever resigns for being incompetent, or hardly ever gets sacked for it. Far from good traditions being nurtured in these and other critical areas, they are being destroyed elsewhere - in education for one. The question of banning books would seem to lie at the bottom of priorities for beleaguered governments that have ruled the country since its inception. This is evident in the manner in which the recent announcement about the banning in question was made. It was perfunctory, vague, and seemed motivated by short-term political expedience. A clear policy that says we shall not ban any books is

nowhere on the horizon. Yet we can further delay a clear declaration on such policy only at our peril as a secular nation.

The argument that these books incite violence and hence should be banned would appear specious on close inspection. The history of suppression of books by official fiat is instructive here. Banning of communist literature has a long history. To refresh our memory, much of that literature in first half of the last century called for violent overthrow of the capitalist system and its replacement by the dictatorship of the proletariat. And much of it was duly suppressed by governments considered by the communists as mere lackeys of the bourgeois. Liberals and communists alike were strongly opposed to such suppression. If there was no justification for banning of books of this genre because they incited violence, there should in fairness be none in the present case.

To refuse to ban books that incite violence is not to condone violence. The threat of violence should rather be confronted directly. The full force of law should be used to prosecute and punish those who want to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state through violence. A mere ban would seem like prescription for inaction.

Finally, banning of books is easy; it is also far less effective as a weapon for combating ideologies. Books prohibited simply go underground. The history of communist movement throughout the world provides ample proof of the futility of prohibition of ideas, as does the spread of Samizdat literature in the Soviet Union.

Let us not ban books.

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Curbing corruption in Titas Gas

From the different reports of investigations by the ACC, the Parliamentary Committee and short-lived Truth Commission, it is abundantly clear that TGTDC is a highly corrupt organisation.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

A Truth Commission started work from August 2008. Sixty-four TGTDC personnel were reported to have deposited Tk.34 crore after admitting bribery. Some members of the concerned parliamentary committee observed that there should not be any problem in taking administrative actions against the personnel as the caretaker

government did not take any action against the committee's findings.

Only one hundred and fifteen officers and staff of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited (TGTDC) came forward to return graft money to the government. The majority of them are small fries like meter readers, linesmen, supervisors, accounts assistants, development assistants, technicians, welders etc. Among them 43 are

meter readers.

Apparently the meter readers are most powerful and influential group. This indicates that they act as agents for collection of graft on behalf of their higher officers and staff, which suits everybody. In case of bigger transactions the higher officers are contacted directly by the concerned suppliers or contractors.

It appears that successive governments were well aware of the need for controlling bribery in TGTDC for quite sometime. They had received various allegations of irregularities and corruption. The enquiries led by the permanent parliamentary committee on electricity, fuel and mineral resources and the Public Accounts Committee have found out the truth about the allegation of irregularities

and corruption against 275 officers and staff of the organisation.

No punitive action has yet been taken against them for reasons best known to the concerned ministry. Needless to say that mere presence of these personnel in the organisation makes it almost impossible to curb corruption in the TGTDC.

Among the corrupt personnel stated above are the deputy general manager, manager, meter readers, linemen and personnel for disconnecting and connecting lines. Apart from the parliamentary committee, the Public Accounts Committee and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) have also found out the truth about the allegations against these personnel. The concerned ministry has been requested

to take appropriate action.

It is learnt from the permanent parliamentary committee that after a long investigation the ACC, after duly ascertaining the truth, submitted a report to the government in March 2009. The report pointed to the commitment of 115 officials to return Tk.400 crore. Till now, no money has been returned.

In fact, the parliamentary committee found it extremely difficult to identify these personnel who are reported to have returned to their jobs through bribery on assumption of power by the present government. No action has been taken against these personnel even after strong recommendation for deterrent action against them.

From the different reports of investiga-

tions by the ACC, the Parliamentary Committee and short-lived Truth Commission, it is abundantly clear that TGTDC is a highly corrupt organisation.

Development of transmission and distribution of gas is vitally important for our economic progress. If we fail to take any punitive action against open bribery in the TGTDC it will be shameful because it will prove that a few corrupt personnel of an important development organisation are more powerful than even the high-level committees and the public accounts committee, and people will consider ACC as a mere paper-tiger. We draw the attention of the prime minister to take appropriate action in this regard.

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