

## For a joyous Eid Let introspection follow celebration

**A**FTER a month of abstinence, the nation is set to celebrate the biggest festival of Muslims around the world. Ramadan is about teaching us empathy for those less fortunate and help us develop ourselves to be better human beings. As Eid approaches, let us take stock of our learning and our short comings, and with the joy of day, also engage in introspection.

Like every year, in the run up to Eid, we witnessed blatantly unreligious practices by traders hiking up prices. We also saw repeat of overloading of road and river transport vehicles and reckless driving leading to unnecessary deaths of holidaymakers. Only yesterday, in the mad rush of traffic, at least 17 people were killed when a truck with holidaymakers skidded off a road in Rangpur.

By now, the capital city is empty of its inhabitants. But as the holidays will draw to a close, we will again see a rush of people getting back to Dhaka. During the last Eid holidays, we reported that at least 265 people died accidents on roads, waterways and railways in just 12 days. Let's hope the authorities take precautions this time so that in the predictable rush, no lives are lost. We urge that passengers, too, give priority to safety over haste, and the authorities put ensure safety on the roads.

Within the last one month we witnessed with horror the burning of indigenous villages in Langadu and the countless deaths due to landslides in Rangamati. In our celebration, let us not forget about those affected and those who are passing the days in grief. After all, the spirit of Ramadan is embodied in empathy. Let each of us reach out to help them, and take stand that such avoidable incidents are not repeated.

We wish our readers and well-wishers Eid Mubarak!

## Closing down Al Jazeera?

### Shortsighted and threatens media freedom

**W**E are stunned and disturbed by the call to close down Al Jazeera Satellite network and its affiliates as one of the demands by four Arab States in order for the recent boycott against Qatar to be lifted. The call for shutting down a popular, internationally recognised news network for political reasons is a regressive move on many counts.

First of all this is a direct threat to freedom of the press and the growth of multiplicity of views. *Al Jazeera* has established itself as an international media outlet that provides divergent views, including the Arab perspective of global issues. Secondly, in a world in which global information is monopolised by western media, to try to ban a news network that prides itself for representing the voices of the Arab world, is short sighted and self destructive. Thus, shutting it down will go against Arab interest.

It is with increasing alarm that we notice how dissenting voices, divergent opinions being either vilified as 'false news' or squashed altogether by intolerant establishments. The need for divergent news sources is, no doubt, all the more crucial. Hiring professionals from the most well-known media outlets and maintaining the highest standards of journalism, *Al Jazeera* has earned a reputation for bringing in fresh perspectives that are free from stereotypes and prejudice evident in some western mainstream media especially in their coverage of conflicts in the Middle East. Its critics have pointed out that it has shown bias in reporting, which, even if it is true, is just as true for other news outlets -- definitely no justification for a complete ban of its operations.

For the sake of freedom of the media, for the flourishing of pluralistic views and for the promotion of voices that are unheard, we hope that the demand for shutting down this broadcaster will be withdrawn.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Make train journeys easier

A few days ago, a newspaper reported that people can now get travel tickets online, and that it'll make journeys pleasurable for commuters going back home.

But the reality is different. Each online account is limited to purchasing only one e-ticket per month. I therefore had to refrain from using the service at any time in the past month so I could book the ticket for Eid. I tried to get an e-ticket on June 22 from Dhaka to Rajshahi. At around 8:30 AM, the website showed that the mobile quota for the day had run out. I tried again the next day at 8 AM, which made me miss my regular bus route and reach office late.

The next time I tried to buy a ticket at 7:55 AM. The website told me it would be available at 7:59 AM. I tried continuously from 7:59 to 8:30 AM, but the website stated that the mobile quota had run out again. Eventually I had to struggle to buy a ticket in person, without using the online service. The journey was far from pleasurable.

Many people living in Dhaka have to travel back to their towns almost every weekend. A double rail line should be set up with a commuter train so that they can live in adjacent districts instead of having to live inside Dhaka. A monthly roundtrip ticket system can be introduced for them. And the railway authorities should operate a research cell that they can develop services according to commuters' preferences and timetables.

Mawduda Hasnin  
Rajshahi

# Minority lives matter

#ResearchMesearch



NADINE SHAAANTA  
MURSHID

**I**T is not a coincidence that Bangladesh survived Cyclone Mora with few casualties while a landslide in the Chittagong Hill Tracts caused by torrential rains has left over 150 dead. Deforestation and hill-cutting are known causes of "natural disasters" like landslides, but illegal land grabbing in the CHT is at the root of deforestation and hill-cutting in the first place. That the region has little or no infrastructure in place for emergency evacuations or care is symptomatic of the kind of neglect that people in CHT experience on a daily basis. The process is clear: some will gain money and power at all cost, including the cost of human lives and the environment, particularly those lives that are worth less than others.

A fire in Grenfell Tower in London spread quickly killing 70 people and counting. That the building housed some of the most economically disadvantaged people living in the city is, similarly, not a coincidence. The aluminium-clad insulation of the building, added last year as part of a renovation project apparently to improve the view from the luxury apartments in north Kensington, is a fire hazard. That is the reason for which high-rise buildings in the United States, for example, are banned from using it. So on one hand, it is an issue of regulation. But, on the other hand, it raises the question of whether such materials are used only in buildings that house low-income individuals (presumably to reduce the viewing displeasure of the upper classes). At the same time, the (slow) emergency response to the fire indicates that much may not be different between those who were living in Grenfell Tower and those who live in CHT.

Across the Atlantic, in the United States, the police officer responsible for the shooting death of Philando Castile was recently acquitted of manslaughter, even amidst video-evidence of the shooting which started as a conversation about broken taillights. The officer asked Castile to show him his driving license. When he reached for it, he was shot dead. Castile is one of 958 people shot



and killed by police in the United States in 2016. In 2017, the police have already killed 460 people.

Also in the United States, a University of Alabama student, Megan Rondini, was raped by an influential man, TJ Bunn Jr, in 2015. When she reported the rape, she found exactly how archaic Alabama's rape laws were. Apparently, in Alabama, it counts as rape only if the victim can prove that she "earnestly" fought back against her rapist. What happened after that can only be termed as repercussions for reporting her rape: she found herself being questioned about crimes she didn't commit. That was used as a bargaining chip — the only way to save herself was by withdrawing her complaint. The university counsellor she sought help from refused services because she was a friend of the perpetrator. In February 2016 she hanged herself. Like many women and men who experience rape, Megan had post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, but little help from institutions that were meant to protect and help her.

What becomes clear is that minority

status, be it in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and/or class, puts people in line of various forms of discrimination, which in turn has lifelong repercussions for those who are discriminated against. When some of these identities collide, and each identity faces a different form of power structure, what they experience is compound discrimination. This means, their odds of experiencing systemic violence and discrimination not only goes up, it becomes more complicated, and requires the use of multiple lenses — say, the lenses of race and gender — to understand the experiences of the individuals concerned.

What also becomes clear is that the current forms of governance and social organisation in much of the world are oppressive toward people; indeed, people are subjugated via policies and regulations that protect the wealthy and the powerful. In some cases, the same rules don't even apply.

It is no longer enough to simply say that certain individuals are more likely to be discriminated against. We need to identify the problem by its name —

institutional discrimination, institutional racism, institutional sexism, institutional classism — and dismantle the system that systematically renders the lives of certain people an uphill struggle against a world that tells them that working hard will solve their problems, a world that blames individuals for structural problems that they had no role in creating.

The underlying thread linking all these stories is the thread of discrimination, particularly of minority group members, by institutions and individuals in positions of power.

This Eid, as we end our month-long fasting ritual in an effort to internalise the experiences of those who are less fortunate than us, let us condemn the laws, regulations, and systems that maintain this "misfortune." In Bangladesh. In the United Kingdom. In the United States. Everywhere.

Let us recognise that discrimination against one is injustice toward all.

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## CV and stature

*What makes one tick as Rashtrapati, and what doesn't, is determined by the incumbent. It's for Kovind to prove sceptics wrong*



SHEKHAR GUPTA

achievements in public life "in spite of" his humble origins, and even those on the margins may echo the answer embarrassed Congress leaders had given when skeletons were tumbling out of the closet of Pratibha Patil's past as she was nominated in 2007.

My paper was then trawling Ms. Patil's

**W**HETHER Ram Nath Kovind has the credentials to be India's 14th Rashtrapati or not is now a non-question. His committed backers will read his many

parliamentarian, governor, first woman president (second Dalit now) and, finally, no better or worse than some of the others to have occupied the same position. The numbers in the Electoral College matter, so the Congress and the UPA brazened it out with Ms. Patil. Critics, this columnist included (National Interest: Pratibha Patil, *The Precedent*), had warned that this marked a new trivialisation of what was, after all, a titular, yet highly symbolic office. We had also warned that there will be consequences, and that a poor and tempting precedent was being set. We are seeing it play out now.

Mr. Kovind may trail Ms. Patil in terms of political experience, but he certainly more than makes up for it with his academic qualification, legal track

Giri. We've had a widely respected and admired Muslim politician like Dr. Zakir Husain and a forgettable Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed. We have also seen two professional civil servants K. R. Narayanan from the Foreign Service and Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, a science-bureaucrat.

That pretty much accounts for all the presidents we have had so far. You can say with pride that none of them failed to maintain the non-controversial dignity needed of this highest office. Two prominent exceptions: The Emergency, when Ahmed signed Indira Gandhi's ordinances without reading; and later a short phase when Singh allowed his office to become a den of intrigue against Rajiv Gandhi. Relatively ordinary men can successfully grow into an office with

document and pen to his staff and saying, if there are any more ordinances, just ask them to wait. Ahmed was very well qualified, from an Anglicised old social elite, and checked that all-important "identity" box as well, as a Muslim.

Top of the memorable ones, on the other hand, will be Kalam, not merely for his vital intervention on Bihar and substantive nudging over some dodgy judicial appointments — in spite of the collegium — but also his calming influence over a post-Gujarat riots India in a period also fraught with war-like tensions of Operation Parakram. Venkataraman and Sharma gave India confidence in the resilience of the "system" through periods of much political instability and short-tenure governments, some running on daily wages. Narayanan enhanced the moral and intellectual dignity of the office in a manner comparable to Radhakrishnan, much earlier. Remember also his dignified confidence in the tricky period when Mr. Vajpayee's government was defeated with one vote and had to lead the war in Kargil as a caretaker.

What was the difference between those we remember with affection and gratitude, those we have forgotten, and a few that we'd rather forget. The history of our presidency throws no connection with qualification, political record, caste, religion, or social background. In short, it was never the quality of the CV that defined an incumbent's performance or legacy. It was that other, unquantifiable quality: Stature. Kalam, Venkataraman, and Narayanan had it. Giri, Ahmed, and Ms. Patil didn't.

This is the question about Mr. Kovind. You can be raised to any office if you have the numbers with you. The challenge is to raise your stature to that office. Under our Constitution, the presidency is even more titular and unimportant than the governor of a state. A governor can at least play political games and also exercise real powers in periods of President's Rule. The founding fathers had intended the presidency to be the chief patron and symbol of the Constitution, the glory of the Republic. We shouldn't pre-judge Mr. Kovind. As president he will deserve the entire nation's respect due for his office, irrespective of the politics. Hopefully he will also surprise all sceptics.

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Ram Nath Kovind, nominated presidential candidate of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in New Delhi, India June 21, 2017. REUTERS/Adnan Abidi

past and running a series of exposes on murky dealings in the business of sugar, cooperative banking, and private educational institutions. Seeking a cessation of hostilities, a senior Congress leader came to see me very late one evening, with a basket of *langra* mangoes. "All your reporters' stories are correct," he said. So why should we stop running them, I asked. "Because brother, for better or worse, come July 25, she will represent the glory of the republic. So how does it help to dig all this dirt out and give your President-to-be a bad name?"

Some of the justifications the Congress then produced were comparable to what's on offer with Mr. Kovind now. A long career as a

record, and most certainly a blemish-free ledger of personal or family integrity. You can't grudge him the presidency for any inadequacies in his CV. A question, however, needs to be asked: Is a great CV all that one needs to qualify for the highest office in the country? Conversely, will the lack of one disqualify another?

The succession of India's Rashtrapatis does not follow any pattern of academic qualification, social, or political background. We had an intellectual giant like Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and a largely uneducated Giani Zail Singh. We have had political giants, such as Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Pranab Mukherjee and R. Venkataraman, even Neelam Sanjiva Reddy and Shankar Dayal Sharma or a relative lightweight like V. V.

such organised protocol, pomp, and really not very much of substance to do.

Let's now try a different test. Which ones were our most memorable presidencies, and which the most forgettable. We don't need to go so far as the fifties or sixties. But those born in the past 50 years, and certainly the millennials would likely not remember that India had a full-term President called Giri in spite of the fact that he became a vital pawn in Indira Gandhi's game of splitting the Congress and destroying its old guard. And we will all remember Ahmed for the wrong reasons. For my generation, his presidency is defined by that brilliant Abu Abraham cartoon with Ahmed in a bath-tub, chest-hair showing, handing out a signed

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