

Disappointing Pangs

Akber Mohamedali.

During a visit to Canada last year, what struck me most was the excessive prevalence of extreme consumerism as part and parcel of life-style. Each morning brought a 120-page daily paper interspersed with glossy leaflets as if the advertisements one was forced to confront while trying to read the news were not enough. There was no let up by the other media bombarding one with consumer goodies of all shapes and sizes. The mind boggled as one tried to take in a documentary on the local environment rudely interrupted by commercials of the very products that were detrimental to the environment. It appeared that the national pastime was flicking the thirty odd channels on the cable network for hours on end. When I tried a fifteen minute stint at this pastime I ended up by watching at least twenty advertisements as I had to pause at every channel to find out what was on. Is it any small wonder that the conversation with my friends eventually led to the latest 'special offer' at the local mall!

However in the midst of such an environment I came across a group of people who were running a Muslim school. The town had a small population of some 3000 Muslims and the school had less than sixty children. The school, which had been started recently, was quite rudimentary and operating from half built premises. A far cry from the high-tech classrooms in that part of the world. The parents concerned with safeguarding their children from the effects of the highly materialistic society conceded that the standard of their school was low. Yet they were prepared to forego these standards for a short period of time to ensure that their children grew up with Islamic values.

As I sit back and ponder over the year that was, the message from those concerned parents rings loud and clear. Here was a group of Muslims, right in the midst of the trappings of the so called progressive materialistic society, whose concept of achievement was not in getting the 'best' secular education at the expense of erosion of their dearly held Islamic values.

An encounter, not dissimilar, with the seventy year old father of a friend of mine, who I visited in Nigeria

during the first months of the year, surfaces upon my reflections to the same degree. A frail old man living in what can be described as very basic accommodation even by Nigerian standards. To get into the house I had to jump over a couple of open sewage gutters. After attending to his ailment our discussion drifted to some general topics.

I learnt that in the prime of his life he had been a senior civil servant before and after Nigeria's independence. His present lifestyle certainly did not reflect his life's work. As I looked around the badly lit room which had but a few pieces of essential furniture, I wondered why was it that a senior civil servant had to retire in an abode

so humble. As we talked some more I understood that for him the post that he had held was in an earnest desire to serve his country and not for building a personal fortune. As I jumped over the sewage gutters on my return I pondered upon the relative concept of progress amongst Muslim in different parts of the world.

To those with material aspirations the notion of achievement of the Canadian parents or the retired civil servant in Nigeria may seem absurd. However, to a Muslim the end does not justify the means. An act, however small, in the service of and for the pleasure of Allah is a greater achievement than a life long effort dedicated to one's egoistic pursuits. When I begin to assess the year that was with that yardstick, I feel pangs of disappointment despite all the material trappings around me. Unenviable as the task may be it will be my endeavour for the year to come to apply that yardstick, Insha Allah. ■

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