

ID-UL-ADHA: PIETY, FESTIVITY, SACRIFICE

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(English Version)

The festival Id-ul-Zuha, which is better known abroad as Eid-al-Adha falls on the 10th day of the month Zul-Hajj and lasts upto four days. It finds mention in the fifth chapter or Surah of the Holy Quran and it coincides with the descent of Hajj pilgrims from Mount Arafat, the hill east of Mecca. In Persian, it goes by the name Eyd-e-Ghorban; in Turkish as Kurban Bayrami; in the Balkans as Kurban Bajram; in Mandarin Chinese it is Guerbang Jie and the Malaysians and Indonesians call it Hari Raya Korban, while in Bengali it is Korbanir Eid.

Eid congregations are large assemblies and can be held in any clean public space. Prayers are offered before taking breakfast, which is taken after the Namaz, with the sacrificial meat if it can be arranged in time. It is observed with Sunnah prayers that are followed by the Khutbah sermon. Different local cultures make some provisions for their local celebrations within the broad structure of the religious mandate. This is clear from field studies like one in a small place called Tabergen in Indonesia where Quranic recitation contests are held during this Eid, which attracts talent from all over. The proclamation of God's greetings, the Takbir, is tried out in every conceivable and permissible manner, right from dawn.

To many in other religions, Bakr-id conjures an image of slaughter of numerous goats, camels, cattle and other animals but it is worth studying why 150 crore Muslims, which is roughly one fourth of the human race, engage themselves on this day in the sacrifice with so much passion and devotion. Such large-scale slaughter is not a prerogative of only one religion such customs exist in other

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religions as well. Even at the Gadaimai celebrations in Nepal, some 3 to 5 lakh buffalos are reportedly hacked to death in an open field.

But let us leave blood for a moment and get to the original legend that centres on Prophet Abraham or Ibrahim who is at the root of three major religions of the world, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. He is universally respected by all three and on this day, Ibrahim was ready to perform the greatest act of devotion that a human could ever be called to, i.e., to sacrifice his own son at the altar of God, as the Lord commanded him. Muslims believe that this son was Ismail while Jews and Christians insist that he was Isaac or Ishaq. The Quran also mentions Ismael's own devotion and conviction as he begged Ibrahim to uphold God's order and to cover his eyes so that his hands never trembled in his task. But when Abraham removed his blindfold, he saw a ram had been sacrificed in place of his son who was alive, thanks to divine intervention.

This is at the core of the sacrifice and Muslims believe the animal represents the flesh that is destined for such a religious task. The animal is chosen with a lot of care so that it is free from every defect and even in 1917, CH Buck noted that "there is considerable sale of the sacrificial animals on the evening before the festival". It is treated with care, almost like a member of the family and Abdellah Hammoudi, who camped among villagers in Morocco, recalled the love with which rural women lined the eyes of the sacrificial animal with Kohl, as part of a folk ritual. Muslims emphasise on the importance of sparing the victim undue anxiety and that the sacrificer keeps his knife away and he is supposed to speak to it in a calm manner, until the chosen moment. The animal is made to face the holy Kaba and a prayer is read out in the name of the almighty, while the knife is

wielded in strict consonance with the rites of halal. A prayer is read again after the sacrifice, as well.

It is more meritorious for the sacrificer to carry out the zabah himself or he should at least recite the sacrificial prayers. This induces a strong involvement and the strengthening of one's mind, body and resolve as part of one's religion. Let us not forget that millions of living creatures are slaughtered every day all over the world but those who partake of their flesh do not sully their hands with blood or even witness the reality of slaughter. Surah 22, Verse 37 of the Holy Quran mentions that it is "neither their flesh nor their blood (that) reach God, but it is piety that reaches Him". The substitution of a human by an animal is loaded with multiple meanings. John Bowen, Anthropologist of Islam, says that "it is clear that in some cultures, the victim represents a person sacrificing an animal and its flesh stands for his flesh".

There are several Muslims who are vegetarian and animal sacrifice is not an imposition on every person. Islam follows a very strict form of redistributive justice and that ensures compulsory charity, the zakaat, to the poor as one of its five pillars. The sacrificial meat is, therefore, not meant for personal consumption and the third of it is given to the poor and needy, if not more. "The skin of the sacrificial animal can also be donated in the name of God", comments Dr Majida Asad, "or else it may be sold and the proceeds distributed amongst those who are eligible for Zakat".

A century ago, Jaffer Sharif mentioned in his book Islam in India that only those who had spare animals or a certain degree of affluence were commanded to perform this sacrifice, for the greater benefit of society. The fact that it was meant

for food that was to be shared among friends and relatives was made clearer, when Sheriff said that “only quadrupeds and only those whose meat is lawful food may be sacrificed, and the animal must be perfect in all its parts.” But researchers have found that in poorer parts of the east, like in villages of Indonesia, even ducks and chickens were sacrificed and shared. Muslims believe that only the righteous can cross over to heaven on the Pul-sirat, the Bridge of Death, and those who had not led a clean life would definitely fall off, the narrow path to the Heaven, to open jaws of hell. This bridge is finer than a hair and sharper than the edge of a sword.

British commentators in India observed even in the 19th century that often "seven persons jointly sacrificed" an animal as "they believed these animals would quickly travel over the Pul-sirat.”