

MILAD UN NABI

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(English Version)

We all enjoy one more holiday every year on Milad un Nabi but hardly bother to find out why. This date, which is better known internationally as Mawlid, marks the twelfth day of the month of Rabi u'l Awwal, when Prophet Muhammad is believed to have been born. Its public celebration or otherwise, however, continues to be disputed as orthodox Muslims like the Salafis and Wahabis, oppose it. Extreme fanatics like the ISIS who spearhead radical agitations to 'cleanse' Islam, condemn it and Saudi Arabia even bans its observance.

Yet, it can be said quite safely that all over the world, Muslims, including orthodox Sunnis, celebrate this date. Even an increasingly- radical Pakistan heralds this national holiday quite majestically with a 31-gun salute in Islamabad. The capital cities of the provinces in Pakistan also start Milad with 21-gun salutes, but one cannot be too sure whether the self appointed saviours of the great religion will permit such festivities, as they go on imposing their archaic diktat on all contrary beliefs through brute force. In India and Bangladesh, millions of Muslims, both Sunnis and Shias, celebrate the birth of Hazrat Muhammad through different widely varying observances. But then, we also have the Deobandi sect and the dissident Ahmadiyyas who denounce its public celebration.

In colloquial Arabic, 'Mawlid' means the date of birth and we can trace its sanctity back to the four great original Khalifas, who observed it, but more as an 'open house' day rather than as a public festival. Muslims in different countries have their own local names for Milad un Nabi, such as Maulidi in African Swahili or Malidur Rasul in Malay or Melvid-i Sherif in Turki. As in other religions, there are problems in arriving at unanimity on the exact date of birth, and Shias insist that Hazrat Muhammad was born a little later. This disagreement is not unusual, because till date, while most Christians believe that Christ was born on Christmas eve, some Eastern Churches celebrate it on the 6th of January and many feel that neither date can be established with proof. Like Janmashtami, the holy hour of birth is past midnight and many Muslim communities observe night-long prayers and vigil. History tells us that Mawlid or Milad was actually converted into a major celebration by the Fatimid Khalifas, almost three centuries after Muhammad's death: as a Muslim response to Christmas. This Shia- inspired origin and the Shia-type rituals like torchlight processions and decorating mosques were enough for strict Arab Sunnis to oppose it, right from its early days. Despite this, records testify that masses in most Sunni countries had started observing this date from the 12th century onwards, though complicated theological arguments continued unabated for centuries.

In India, as elsewhere, Milad celebrations are not like the two Eids, as they are neither universal nor uniform. In most places, it was and continues to be an evening dedicated to prayers, where men assemble under the leadership of Maulavis, though women have started their own group prayers as well. It is also a part of the tradition to organise public Quran recitation competitions. A colonial report of 19th century noted that it was celebrated as the Baraa Wafat or the twelfth night, when "Fatihas are recited for Muhammed's soul and other works in praise of the Prophet's excellences are read". It describes how in many parts of India, "a stone with the impression of a footprint on it" called the Qudam Rasool was exhibited and washed with intense devotion. This ritual resembles the veneration of the Buddha's footprint or Vishnu-pada, and the continuity of this tradition shows how Indians at the level of the unlettered masses practice similar symbolic rituals. We are reminded of other Indian religions, when we see how Muslim hosts spread out clean rugs for the community to pray on, and light agarbattis and even sprinkle water on devotees: rose-water.

Loudspeakers managed to transform even small privately organised Milad prayers into public events, and the 'holy word' (paak- kothaa) was disseminated as far as possible to ensure punya. Hasir Mallick describes how several Bengali Muslims also pray for the welfare of their ancestors on this night, somewhat like Hindus do on pitri-tarpan. He also narrates that when Maulavis end their sermon, the entire gathering sing and recite together Prasansha-geets of the Prophet: Yaa Nabi Salaam Aalaayakaa! After this, batasaa or sweets are distributed among the villagers, and special care is taken to feed the Maulavis who led the prayers.

In many towns or qasbas, Muslims often contribute a lot to bring out attractive day-time processions on horseback, replete with green turbans and flags, and decorate their mosques and public thoroughfares with festoons and other decorations. The practice of organising Jaloos or large processions, involving thousands and lakhs of persons, is becoming increasingly popular as towns vie with each other. The mammoth public turnouts, the Jashne Jaloos at Dhaka and Chittagong are certainly all time records, where several lakhs march with green flags and festoons along with microphone-mounted vans of singers and reciters. Other Milads in the subcontinent captivate massive crowds through attractive music, songs and prayers and it is interesting to see how many of them, especially in Pakistan, end the evening with dazzling Diwali-Dusshera type display of fireworks.

The increasing carnivalesque character of this event, however, continues to alarm purists. But then, all religions in India have gaities like musical quwwals, rhythmic bhajans, dancing sangha-kirtans, juloos, loud microphones and noisy melas, and all of them coexist with serious prayers, holy chants and deep piety. At the end, we may remember that large public gatherings in the name of religion also serve other purposes as well. They attract mass level participation from those who may not be too religious; they help eliminate social barriers and they ensure stronger fraternal bonding, all in the name of god.