

WHAT EXACTLY IS RAMZAN?

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We are passing through a traumatic period when the very 'idea of India' is being challenged by forces that are ignorant of the contribution of different communities to the architecture of Indian existence. One of the reasons for this crisis could be that we were complacent or had taken for granted that the essential faith in multi-culturality must have sunk in after 65 years of existence as an independent nation. We had basically not taken pains to understand each other's beliefs, religious practices and life-sustaining values — in short, each other's essentially different ways of thinking. As a result, determined mischief-makers could play upon these 'differences' and deliberately spread misunderstanding and poison among the masses. To give an example, let us see how much non-Muslims know about major Islamic observances and festivals — except that secular India gave us 'holidays' on these days and those who had friends among them could wish them. How many realise why Muslims go through a long month of fasting from before dawn to after sunset. We do appreciate that it is really creditable — their energies call this devotion to be an evidence of their fanaticism — but few take the extra effort to learn why they do it. As this month of Ramzan or Ramadan can fall in almost any season, the period of fast without touching water often becomes rather long. We all know that Muslims end this month of fasting when the first slice of the Eid moon is sighted as our holiday depends on it, but beyond this, most of us know little else the major festival of India's largest 'minority'.

So, let us try to understand more about this practice of fast that Prophet Muhammad instituted in the ninth month of the lunar calendar: to commemorate the first revelation of the Quran to him. The forty days of fasting before Easter that the Christians call the 'Lent' may have inspired it though this mandate is nowhere as obligatory. Some Arabs practiced this mandatory fast even before Islam arrived, like the Mandeans of northern Iraq who were reported by Abu Zanad in the mid eighth century. As is known, Prophet Muhammad often turned around quite a few pre-Islamic festivals of the period of Jahillyah or 'ignorance' into observances that bore the stamp of ethics and new meaning. There is no doubt that the Prophet made it compulsory among Muslims. Jews observe fast on Yom Kippur and other religions like Hinduism also enjoin certain days for religious fasts. Hinduism prescribes a

period of restricted diet like Navaratri, but most leave it to the individual to decide. The binding observance on such a large scale as Muslims do all over the world is really beyond comparison.

The Arabs call it Ramadan which is from their root word for scorching heat or dryness. In other words, it was meant to take physical suffering head and deliberately in order to strengthen one's resolve and inner conviction. This month most of the world's 160 crore Muslims practice strict Sawm and after a pre-dawn meal called Suhoor and their first prayer Fajr, they do not touch even a drop of water or any food until the sun sets. It is one of the five pillars of Islam and the real test is to keep working through the day at the same pace as the well fed do and not to permit any slow-down despite hours of dehydration. Islam exempts only the sick or those who are really old or travelling, as well as women who are pregnant from this rigorous fasting but it also counsels them to make up for their omission at the first available opportunity. How long is the fast? India like Arab countries could have it for 15 to 16 hours, while in New Zealand it could be for less than 10. But as we go up to Europe or North America, daylight hours extend to 20 hours, while the sun never sets near the North Pole. To obviate extreme rigour, Muslims may simply stick to the sunset hours of Mecca. Several mosques all over the world arrange for the entire Quran to be recited over thirty nights in prayers called Tarawih. What is less known to outsiders is that Muslims are also expected to exercise utmost restraint in every form of behaviour and abstain from sexual relations during their fast. All forms of good conduct are amply rewarded by the Almighty during this holy period and this injunction against aggression or spite is as important as fasting. In this context, it is tragic to see some fanatics waging a relentless and inhumanly destructive war on their co-religionists in the Middle East during this holy month.

Just as Yoga is not just contorting the body, Roza is not only a test of physical endurance: it is meant to infuse moral and religious virtues and bind the community more strongly. Everyone knows that many find the fast too rigorous but the spirit of the family and community sustain them — even as many look constantly at their watches for the end of the day's fast. But it gives them strength of will-power and discipline and proudly distinguishes Muslims from others. Among its virtues the most remarkable is that of compulsory charity, Zakaat, which is another pillar of Islam that mandates that the poor must be given a portion of one's earning as Sadaqah. During Ramzan, this is increased as religious merit also becomes more. Despite uncompromising Roza, common Muslims actually celebrate the month and lights and lanterns are strung in mosques and public places, a tradition that was started in Egypt. Indonesians and Malaysians light obor torches and twinkling pelita lamps during this

period. In Java, people bathe in hot springs before starting to fast whereas in some parts of Indonesia a dragon-like creature is taken out on parade in honour of the winged steed of the Prophet, called Buraq al Nabi. Giant drums and firecrackers are used to wake up people before the sun appears.

At the time of sunset, the fast is broken usually with dates and a sweet drink, followed by Maghrib, which is the fourth of the five namaz that pious Muslim observe every day. An essential feature of Islam are meals called Iftar that are taken after the whole day's fast which is meant to bring the entire community together. It is a different matter altogether that those did not fast often joined the Muslims in this religious meal and the ritual has developed political overtones. This year Rashtrapati Bhavan has decided not to carrying on this custom, which leads to different interpretations. In any case, Iftar has given rise to a whole genre of culinary excellence and food markets that are shut during the day bustle in the evenings with tantalising aromas and abundant choices. Arabs, for instance, move from juices, salads and appetisers to lamb and other spicy meat dishes, along with rice pulaos that they call pilaf. They conclude with a rich dessert of soft sweet aromatic luqaimat dumplings, baklava cakes of nuts and honey and a sweet pastry of noodles and cheese called kunafeh. The orthodox bemoan the fact that whatever health benefits one acquires through the long fasts disappear for those who overeat at Iftar, but humans are made thus. While the rich can afford their chef-styled Iftars and pre-dawn Sehri meals, peasants make do with rice-cakes and other equally simply fare.

It is needless to say that most Muslims look forward to the end of the month with Eid ul Fitr that is popular as Bayrami in Turkey, Russia and in many European countries. It is also called the Sweet Festival by many and the "smaller" Eid, like the small Sallah of Nigeria, whose aggressive Boko Haram Muslim desperadoes have thundered into world news. The sighting of the thin slice of the new moon is fairly well known to non-Muslims as well, because a public holiday revolves around it. Once the fast ends, it is compulsory for Muslims to congregate in large public spaces, often called Idgahs, for this special community prayer. It is then time to visit the elders of families and seek their blessings. Children enjoy it more as they receive not only new clothes but cash or gifts as Eidi — much like other innocent children do, during Christmas or Diwali. People move on to meet their relations and friends, but such is the power of the day that they greet and hug even complete strangers. It is custom for richer Muslims in many part of the world to place large quantities of foodstuff at the doorsteps of the needy, while some keep money and delicacies. Sumptuous community meals follow on open rugs and it is time for chocolate, nuts, cookies like Kahkaa, bakery goodies, sweets of every conceivable type. Afghanistan

does it with sweet cakes and jalebis, while Indonesians celebrate with a sticky rice preparation cooked in bamboo called Lemang. The lachcha and sweet seyyunia and dozens of delicious condiments made of milk, nuts, dates and vermicelli. One reason for sweets is to restore energy that fasting may have sapped, because at the end of the day, all time-tested festivals have their own critical reasons.

Eid sermons are an essential element of the entire religious observance and the entire community seeks to congregate in a spirit of fraternity and equality — from which others can learn so much. And, despite provocations, they invariably seek the mercy of the Almighty and pray for peace unto all mankind. It is essential for us to understand that Islam has local and national variations and the India or the sub-continental version of Islam is distinctly different. The extreme position of some ‘orthodox elements’ to ‘purify’ Islam in this sub-continent is not only impractical but also contrary to our way of life — that believes in give and take, accommodation and adjustment. The India we sincerely believe in is one that happily synergies the best that every community professes and offers — with common cultural elements interwoven from all religions — that are ‘Indian’ first and everything after that. It is time we understood each other better, because that is the only remedy against those the acid attacks on plural India by those who are hell bent in spreading partial and misleading information. Our need is to save a India, while theirs is to sow hatred among communities to divide and destroy the India of Ashoka, Akbar and Mahatma Gandhi.