

RAMZAN AND EID UL FITR: FAST, FEAST AND PIETY

Jawhar Sircar

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(English Version)

We all know that Muslims go through a month of fasting throughout the day during Ramzan or Ramadan and that they break it when the moon of Eid is sighted. Most of us know little else about this rigorous fast and the major festival of India's largest 'minority'.

So, let us try to see a little 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 it even before Islam, like the Mandeans of northern Iraq as reported by Abu Zanad in the mid eighth century, but as is known that the Prophet 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 meaning. Making it mandatory among Muslims was definitely the contribution of the Prophet. The Jewish observe fast on Yom Kippur and religions like Hinduism enjoin certain days for religious fasts, or even prescribe 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 on 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 at 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. 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.

At the time of sunset, the fast is broken usually with dates and a sweet drink, followed by the fourth namaz, Maghrib and full meals called Iftar that are often taken by the entire community. This 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. It is sad to see how some have managed to convert Iftars into vote bank get-togethers where gravitas is often surrendered to expediency. While the rich can afford chef-styled Iftar and pre-dawn Sehri meals, the peasants of Bengal make do with simple rice-cakes like Aandosaa and Paakaan.

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. 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.

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. 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.

The rich 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 invariably seek the mercy of the Almighty and pray for peace unto all mankind. The way death and destruction are taking over in the world, we may all need to pray much harder during this coming Eid.