

Opinion

From Hunger to Humanity: What the World Can Learn from the Sacred Fast of Ramadan

Ramadan or Ramzan that Muslims are observing now is not just about abstaining from food and drink; it's a month of spiritual reflection, self-discipline, and heightened charity. From global unity in fasting to the powerful acts of Zakat, this sacred month teaches the world the true meaning of empathy and communal strength. Yet, even in the midst of devotion, the ongoing conflicts among co-religionists serve as a stark reminder of how much more humanity needs to learn



Jawhar Sircar • March 11, 2025 0 4 minutes read



(Clockwise) A family does dua before breaking fast, zakat message image, taraweeh prayer in Mecca Masjid, Hyderabad and a lit up mosque during Ramzan
| Courtesy: Anonymous

There are admirable traits in all religions that I salute. Very recently, the world's largest congregation of humanity took their sacred dip at the *maha-prayag* of *Mahakumbh*. Yogi's team claims 66 crores bathed, while mature estimates place this at 25 crores — still a world record. We admire the tremendous social service that Sikhs render across the globe, like offering free food to all irrespective of religion or origin, in every Gurudwara. They are the first to cook and provide hot meals for Americans stranded during wildfires and snowstorms. Similarly, the Muslim custom or mandatory charity or Zakat

that every earning Muslim has to render to the less fortunate is simply outstanding. And right now, what amazes many is how some least 150 crores or more of the 204 crore Muslims all over the world (1/4th of humanity) will be working like normal every day throughout March 2025 — without a drop of water or a morsel of food. What astonishing self-discipline!

The more we learn of other religions, the more we understand each other and the initial doubts and misgivings about other religions disappear. We understand the special features of other religions and also the fact that, ultimately, all devout people everywhere seek the blessings of the Almighty.

Ramzan: A Time for Reflection and Discipline

This current Muslim month of Ramzan or Ramadan is the ninth of their lunar calendar. Prophet Muhammad instituted the custom of fasting from dawn to dusk — to commemorate the first revelation of the Holy Quran to him. Some Arabs practised 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 Jahiliyyah or 'ignorance' into observances that bore the stamp of ethics and new meaning.

Jews observe fast on Yom Kippur and Christians used to do so during Lent before Easter. Other religions, like Hinduism, also enjoy certain days of religious fasting. Hinduism prescribes a period of strictly 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 Power of Fasting: A Global Tradition

The Arabs call it Ramadan which is from their root word for scorching heat or dryness. It was meant to take physical suffering head-on — deliberately — in order to strengthen one's resolve and inner conviction. 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. Islam exempts only the sick or those who are really old or travelling, as well as pregnant women.

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.

Taraweeh: The Spiritual Significance of Nightly Prayers

Several mosques all over the world arrange for the entire Quran to be recited over thirty nights in prayers called Taraweeh.

Despite the uncompromising Roza, common Muslims celebrate the month and lights and lanterns are strung in mosques and public places, a tradition that was started in Egypt. While Indonesians and Malaysians light obor torches and twinkling pelita lamps, the Gulf countries light up mosques quite ostentatiously. In many countries, giant drums, firecrackers and microphones are used to wake up people before the sun appears.

Iftar: Unity Through Shared Meals

It is only normal for everyone to look forward to sunset when the fast is broken — usually with dates and a sweet drink. Then comes Maghrib, which is the fourth of the five namaz that a pious Muslim observes every day.

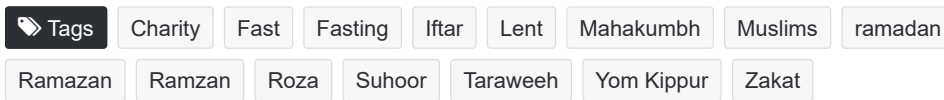
In India, Iftar, the community meal taken after the whole day's fast, assumed a political dimension— to display overt secularism — or a show of power and status. But, nevertheless, the real Iftaar is meant to bring the entire community together — to share food in common. Iftar has given rise to a whole genre of culinary excellence and food markets that are shut during the day and bustle in the evenings with tantalising aromas and abundant choices.

Zakat: Charity at the Heart of Ramzan

As mentioned, a most remarkable Islamic virtue is that of compulsory

charity, Zakat. It is another pillar of Islam that mandates that the poor must be given a portion of one's earnings as Sadaqah. During Ramzan, this is increased as religious merit also becomes more.

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 (that other than a brutal Israel) some Muslims are also **waging a war** on their co-religionists in the Middle East during this holy month.



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