

## Siam in Ramadan

SYED ASHRAF ALI

**R**OZA is a Persian word. Roza or *al-Siam* (in Arabic) must not be equated with normal fasting. There is a gulf of difference between Roza in Islam and mere abstention from food and drinks. *Al-Siam* is something much subtler, much nobler, more exalted and majestic. "It is an armour," declares the holy Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him), "with which one protects oneself" (Bukhari). It calls for full exercise of self-restraint on all the senses and limbs – a total and absolute control of not only wrath, malice, arrogance, greed, jealousy, hatred and enmity, but of all indecent and unhygienic dreams and desires. The holy Prophet (pbuh) ordains: "So let not him (who fasts) utter immodest (or foul) speech, nor let him act in an ignorant manner; and if a man quarrels with him or abuses him, he should say twice, 'I am fasting'" (Bukhari). Abu Huraira (RA) testifies that the holy Prophet (RA) said, "He who does not give up uttering falsehood and acting according to it, Allah has no need of his giving up of his food and his drinks" (Bukhari).

*Al-Siam* indeed is something unique. It enjoys, in the eyes of Allah, a divine grace unparalleled by any other act of piety and worship. According to a *Quds Hadith* (utterances attributed to Allah outside the Holy Quran), the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah, in His infinite Mercy, declares: "A man's work belongs to him. A good deed is repaid from tenfold to seven hundred times. Fasting belongs to Me and I repay" (Bukhari).

The holy month of Ramadan occupies a unique place in the Islamic Calendar. It is the only month which has been explicitly described and analysed in the Holy Quran. The very fact that the Revelation of the Holy Quran commenced in the

month of Ramadan, which is the ninth month of the Arabic year, testifies so eloquently to the sanctity, serenity and divine excellence of this holy month. The Holy Quran authenticates: "Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Quran, as a guide to mankind; also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong)".

What is more, it was in this sacred month that Hazrat Ibrahim (peace be upon him) was blessed with the divine *Sahifa*. It was in this month of majesty that the holy *Taurat* reached mankind through (Hazrat) Musa (peace be upon him). It was again in this holy month that the sacred *Zabur* saw the light of day through Hazrat

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Daud (peace be upon him). Last but not the least, Hazrat Isa (peace be upon him) had the privilege and honour of receiving divine *Injil* on the 12<sup>th</sup> of this auspicious month. A good number of *Ahadith* also testify to the divine excellence and eminence of this sacred month. Abu Huraira (RA) reported God's Messenger (pbuh) as saying, "When Ramadan begins the gates of paradise are opened, the gates of *Jahannam* are locked, and the devils are chained" (Bukhari and Muslim).

Sal'man al-Farsi (RA) told of God's Messenger (pbuh) saying in a sermon which he delivered to them on the last day of *Shaban*: "A great month, a blessed month, a month containing a night which is better than a thousand months has approached you people. God has

Some say that it is one of the names of Allah, but there is no authentic or reliable authority to testify to this claim.

Fasting is divided into two main categories – (1) The *Fard* or the obligatory Fasting and (2) the *Tatawwur* or the voluntary Fasting. The *Fard* Fasting comprises the *Ramadan* Fasting, the *Kaffara* or the Fasting of Atonement and the *Nadhr* relating to the taking of a vow.

Allah ordains in the holy Quran: "O ye, who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint" (2:183).

*Al-Siam* or the Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, one of the five pillars or *Arkan* of Islam, is obligatory for every Muslim provided he or she is in full possession of his or her

faculties. There are, however, exemptions for temporary causes, such as menstruation or child-birth bleeding and persons in sick-bed or on a journey. The exemptions clearly signify that Allah never wants *His Bandas* to suffer and undergo self-torture. The Holy Quran clearly says: "Allah does not want to put you to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete prescribed period and to glorify Him in that He has guided you; and perchance ye shall be grateful" (2:185).

*Al-Siam* or the Fasting is indeed an ancient form of worship prescribed for the Muslims as well as other nations which preceded us, ever since the time of *Hazrat Adam* (peace be upon him). According to the commentators of *Al-Manar*, "Fasting is an ancient form of worship recognised by previous religions – even heathen ones. It constituted an essential part of every religion. It was known to the ancient Egyptians, from whom it passed on to the ancient Greeks, who used to enforce it". Fasting in different forms was also in vogue among the Hindus and the Buddhists, the Christians and the Jews. According to *Al-Manar*, "The best-known and oldest of Christian Fasts is that of Lent, which precedes Easter. This is the same Fasting period as observed by Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them) and his apostles". The Christians were categorically commanded by their Prophet to fast:

"Moreover, when ye fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance..... But thou when thou fastest, anoint thine head and wash thy face" (Matt. 6: 16, 17). Again, when the Pharisees objected to Jesus' disciples not keeping the fast as often as John's, his only answer was that when he would be taken away "then shall they fast in those days" (Luke 5: 33-35). Moses (peace be upon him) himself fasted for 40 days to qualify himself to receive that Divine Revelation. Jesus (peace be upon him) also fasted for 40 days in the desert and commanded his disciples to do the same.

Islam introduced a new meaning, a new vision, a new idea, a new spirit into the institution of Fasting. For the first time in history, Fasting was blessed with a systematic regulation, a scientific method, a noble justification. In the days before the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) Fasting meant the suffering of some privation in the hours of mourning and sorrow. Islam introduced a revolutionary innovation – *Al-Siam* stood not for mere suffering or abstinence but for an institution for the moral uplift and spiritual elevation of the human soul. A Muslim Fast never indicates mere abstinence from food and drinks and sex, and Fasting in Islam is never meant for self-torture. It is undoubtedly stricter than other systems of Fasting, but it provides alleviations for special circumstances. The restraint from the animal instincts for food, drink and sex enables the attention of a man or a woman to be directed to higher and nobler aspects. Fasting in the light of Islam helps him or her overcome lusts and thereby sets us at the mouth of the road leading to perfection – perfection to be achieved through prayers and penance, *Taqwa* and *Tarawwih*, contemplation and acts of charity, total restraint and abstinence from all evil acts and thoughts. The self-restraint or *Taqwa*, indeed, has to be a voluntary effort comprising the elements of caution, alertness and fear of Allah. Benign Providence Himself loves this glorious and voluntary effort and attempt at self-restraint by his *Banda*. In the words of the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), "By He, in Whose hands Muhammad's soul rests, Allah prefers the bad breath of one who fasts to the fragrance of musk" (Bukhari and Muslim).

The holy month of *Ramadan* has come back once again with all its pristine glory and divine excellence to enable us to learn self-restraint, to temper us in the kiln of *Taqwa*, to provide us with a divine privilege, a unique opportunity to receive Allah's Mercy directly from Him. Let us celebrate it in a befitting way, not through lavishness and sumptuous *Iftars* and *Sehirs*, not through extravagance and prodigality, but through *Taqwa* and *Tarawwih*, self-restraint and meditation, prayers and penance.

Syed Ashraf Ali is former Director General of Islamic Foundation Bangladesh.

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## White cane: Symbol of safety for the blind

PARVEZ BABUL

**Y**ESTERDAY was October 15, the World White Cane Safety Day. The purpose of observing the day is to stimulate the general public to better understanding of blindness and visual impairment and to make them more aware of the white cane as a mobility aid. The white cane works as a tool for the blind as well as a symbol. The blind use such tools to alert themselves of obstacles in their path and as a symbol to alert others of their blindness.

But safety should not be confined on roads along. It has much wider connotation. This is why it should be the policy of the government, NGOs and the civil society to encourage and enable the blind to participate fully in the social and economic life and to engage in remunerative employment. The blind and the visually impaired shall have the same right as all others to the full use of the streets, public buildings, transportation, amusement, etc.

James Biggs of Bristol claimed to have invented the white cane in 1921. In February 1931, Guilly d'Herbemont launched a scheme for a national white stick movement for blind people in France. The campaign was reported in British newspapers leading to a similar scheme being sponsored by Rotary Clubs throughout the United Kingdom. In May 1931, the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) suggested in its Radio broadcasts that blind individuals might be provided with a white stick, which would be universally recognised as a symbol indicating that somebody was blind or visually impaired. In 1930, a Lion's Club member watched a blind man attempted to make his way across a busy street using a black cane. After realising that the black cane was barely visible to motorists, the Lion's Club decided to paint the cane white to increase its visibility to oncoming motorists.

During the early 1960's, several state, organisations, rehabilitation agencies serving the blind and visually impaired citizens of the United States urged Congress to proclaim October 15 of each year to be white cane safety day. The then president of USA, Lyndon B. Johnson went down in history as the first to proclaim October 15 as 'White Cane Safety Day' and called upon the people to observe the day with appropriate ceremonies and activities.

In the first white cane proclamation, President Johnson commended blind people for the growing spirit of independence and the increased determination to be self-reliant and dignified.

He said "A white cane in our society has become one of the symbols of a blind person's ability to come and go on his/ her own. Its use has promoted courtesy and opportunity for mobility of the blind on our streets and highways".

On October 15, 2000, President Bill Clinton again reminded people about the history of the white cane as a tool and its purpose as a symbol of blindness. Clinton comments, "with proper training, by using the white cane blind people can enjoy greater mobility and safety determining the location of curbs, steps, uneven pavement and other physical obstacles in their path. The white cane gives the blind and visually impaired the freedom to travel independently to their educational institutions, workplaces and to participate more fully in the life of their communities. It reminds us that the barriers against people with disabilities are discriminatory attitudes and practices, which our society has too often placed in their way".

Nasrin Jahan (35) is a visually impaired lady. She lives in Dhaka and is associated with a leading international NGO, which is working for the betterment of the disabled. She says, "Every blind or visually impaired person shall have the right to make use of a white cane. Blind persons can do most jobs if they are given opportunity and training. The primary problem of blindness is the people's lack of knowledge about it. The white cane is not just a tool that can be used to achieve independence, it is also a symbol of the blind citizens".

Nasrin added, "Hardly about fifty percent of the blind and visually



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impaired of our country are aware of and know how to use the white cane. This is why the October 15 should be

the day to create awareness among the blind and the sighted people about the white cane; its need, how

to and why to use it, how to and why to help the blind to use it properly".

The public and private transport authority, drivers, helpers, conductors etc. should get briefing and practical knowledge about the white cane, its user, what type of help and how to offer that to the blind. To keep the footpath clean, to keep the manhole covered, to dustbin in appropriate place are the related responsibilities of the City Corporation authorities, Union Council Chairpersons, Members, Ward Commissioners, conscious people for safe moving of the blind. Most of the blind and visually impaired people of our country live in rural areas. That's why they need to be aware urgently about the white cane to bring them in the mainstream of education, equal rights, empowerment, development etc.

Nasrin uses white cane, especially when she has to walk or cross the road, moving upstairs/downstairs of office/residence/shopping mall etc. She says, "not only the disabled but also all other people should be aware of it. On the other hand, orientation is needed for the Traffic Police. Because they have to help the blind to walk, cross the road or using the public transport. In some developed countries, musical signal in the Traffic Post is available to alert the blind at the time of crossing the road. The government of our country should take initiatives and start such system".

Creating awareness among the people about white cane is very important. Along with the government, more NGOs, civil societies, mass media should also come forward to work through integrated approach to assist the blind and visually impaired in their effort.

Parvez Babul is an NGO activist.

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