

Joy of sacrifice

SYED ASHRAF ALI

I T is not their meat nor their blood that reaches Allah: It is your piety that reaches Him: He has thus made them subject to you, that ye may glorify Allah for His guidance to you: And proclaim the Good News to all who do right. -- The Holy Quran (22:37).

Festivals are a time of thanks-giving and good cheer, of decorating the house and putting on new clothes, of exchanging gifts and greeting family and friends, of preparing special meals, of drinking life to the lees. But 'Eid-ul-Azha' is something extraordinary, something totally different from an ordinary festival. One of the two main festivals in the Islamic calendar (the other being 'Eid-ul-Fitr). 'Eid-ul-Azha' brings for the Muslim world a divine blessing, a rare opportunity not only to enjoy an auspicious day of joy and happiness but also to receive Allah's Mercy and Reward through sacrifice, patience and constancy.

The great festival 'Eid-ul-Azha', popularly known in this sub-continent as Bakrid, is celebrated by the Muslims on the tenth of Dhul-Hijja every year through sacrifices and prayers in memory of the glorious sacrifice of the Prophet Ibrahim and his son Prophet Ismail (peace be upon them). But 'Eid-ul-Azha' does not simply commemorate the unique sacrifice of the prophets Ibrahim and Ismail (peace be upon them), it also testifies so eloquently to the patient way in which both father and son cheerfully offered to suffer any self-sacrifice, however painful it might be, in order to obey the Command of Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds.

Sacrifice has always played a vital role in the chequered history of mankind. The Holy Quran testifies: "To every people did We appoint rites (of sacrifice) that they might celebrate the name of God over the sustenance He gave them from animals (fit for food)" (Sura Hajj, 22:34). Sacrifices have been made to get rid of natural disasters like typhoons and cyclones, to stop flood, to evade famine, to solicit rain, to nullify earthquakes, to extinguish volcanic eruptions, to win wars, to avert tyranny, to appease or eulogise gods and goddesses. Human sacrifices have also been made by various nations in various forms and for various purposes since the dawn of civilisation.

The glorious and inimitable attempt of Hazrat Ibrahim Khalilullah at slaughtering his son Hazrat Ismail Zabihullah (peace be upon them) as a sacrifice in obedience to Benign Command, however, stands unique in the annals of history.

The glorious incident of Prophet Ibrahim's (peace be upon him) historic attempt at sacrificing his son Ismail (peace be upon him) in the name of Allah has been clearly narrated in Sura Saffat in the Holy Quran. The Holy Quran testifies: "He (Ibrahim) said, 'O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee a sacrifice. Now see what is thy view'" (37:102). The son, whose very character was to be Halim, which means ready to suffer and forbear, replied, "O my father! Do as thou art commanded: Thou will find me, if Allah so wills, one practising Patience and Constancy" (37:102).

It should be noted that the sacrifice was demanded of both Prophets Ibrahim and Ismail (peace be upon them). It was indeed a great trial of the

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will of the father and the son. To make sure that it was not an idle dream, and if it was a real order, to make sure that his son consented, Prophet Ibrahim (peace be upon him) consulted the son. The son not only readily consented but also offered to stand true to his promise if his self-sacrifice was really required.

The father sought a solitary corner for the Supreme Sacrifice and took his son towards the hills in Mina. On the way Satan stealthily whispered to Ismail that he was being taken by his father to be killed. But the evil attempt to tempt Ismail (peace be upon him) into refusing to be sacrificed failed miserably and the boy stood steadfast in his obedience to Allah. Thrice did Satan speak to Ismail in the same manner at three different spots but he received the same rebuff every time (This is why pilgrims during the Holy Hajj cast pebbles at the three pillars in Mina symbolising Satan). Just before the Sacrifice, Ismail (peace be upon him) told his father to blindfold himself lest he might not be able to go through the ordeal. Ibrahim did so and brought down his knife. The holy Quran vividly and clearly narrates the incident: "So when they had both submitted their wills (to Allah) and he had laid him prostrate on his forehead (for sacrifice), we called out to him: O Ibrahim! Thou hast already fulfilled the vision (37:103-104). And the angel Jibril with a ram in his arms stopped Ibrahim (peace be upon him) and replaced the son Ismail (peace be upon him) by the ram. Both the father and the son stood the test and deserved the Divine Blessing. Naturally, therefore, Allah, in His infinite Mercy, declared in the Holy Quran: "Thus indeed do We reward those who do right. For this was obviously a trial -- and we ransomed him with a momentous Sacrifice. And we left (this blessing) for him among generations (to come) in later times. Peace and salutation to Ibrahim!" (37:103-109)

It was indeed a great and momentous occasion, when two men, with concerted will, "rang themselves in the ranks" of those to whom self-sacrifice in the service of Benign Providence was the supreme thing in life. The glorious incident commenced a new era in religious history. It teaches us the very essence of our religion that the keys of life and death, and the mysteries of everything around us, are in Allah's hands; that our honesty, determination and upright conduct are not mere matters of policy or convenience, all our life in this world must be lived as in the presence of Benign Providence, that no task or responsibility, however great or difficult a burden it may be, is greater than what we can bear. What is more, it also testifies so eloquently to the fact that Allah does not delight in flesh or blood and no one should suppose that meat or blood is acceptable to the One True God. It was

a pagan fancy that God could be appeased by blood sacrifice. But what Allah accepts, as the glorious incident indicates, are the true offering of our hearts. The Holy Quran states emphatically: "It is not their meat, nor their blood, that reaches Allah: it is your piety that reaches Him." (22:37) The glorious incident in the valley of Mina put an end to the system of Human sacrifice which was common among most ancient people.

The unparalleled episode of Hazrat Ibrahim and Hazrat Ismail's (peace be upon them) unshakable dedication and obedience to Allah had a very significant influence not only on the people of the East but it also had great impact in the West. Like the holy Mi'raj of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) the Qurbani of the Prophets Ibrahim and Ismail (peace be upon them), that occurred in 1800 BC, deeply influenced the men of letters both in the East and in the West.

Even a towering personality like the great Homer seemingly was moved to a great extent. The legendary Greek poet emulated the glorious example of the devout father and his obedient son and used a similar episode in his world-renowned epic poem Iliad. While sailing for Troy to rescue Helen, the Greek fleet under the overall command of Agamemnon was detained at Aulis by a terrible wind blowing in the opposite direction. Days passed, but the fleet could not proceed. A sooth-sayer told Agamemnon that the wind would subside only if his daughter was sacrificed to goddess Diana. Agamemnon sent for his daughter Iphigenia, who was at home, on the plea that she was required to come to Aulis in order to marry Achilles. When Iphigenia came and saw that preparations were afoot not for her marriage

but for her murder, she implored to be spared, but in vain. The moment came for the priest to behead her. The priest raised the sword, but when it came down, it struck not Iphigenia but a goat. It was Diana who did the miracle when she took pity on Iphigenia and whisked her away, making a goat appear on the altar.

It is really surprising that some inadvertently call this great festival 'Eid-ul-Zoha'. The words 'Eid' and 'Zoha' in Arabic mean "joy" and "sacrifice" respectively; 'Eid-ul-Azha' stands for the "Joy of Sacrifice". But "Zoha" in Arabic stands for the "forenoon" or middle of the time and mid-day", and has nothing to do with sacrifice. Naturally, therefore, the term 'Eid-ul-Zoha' will refer to the "joy of forenoon" and can never signify or stand for the "Joy of Sacrifice".

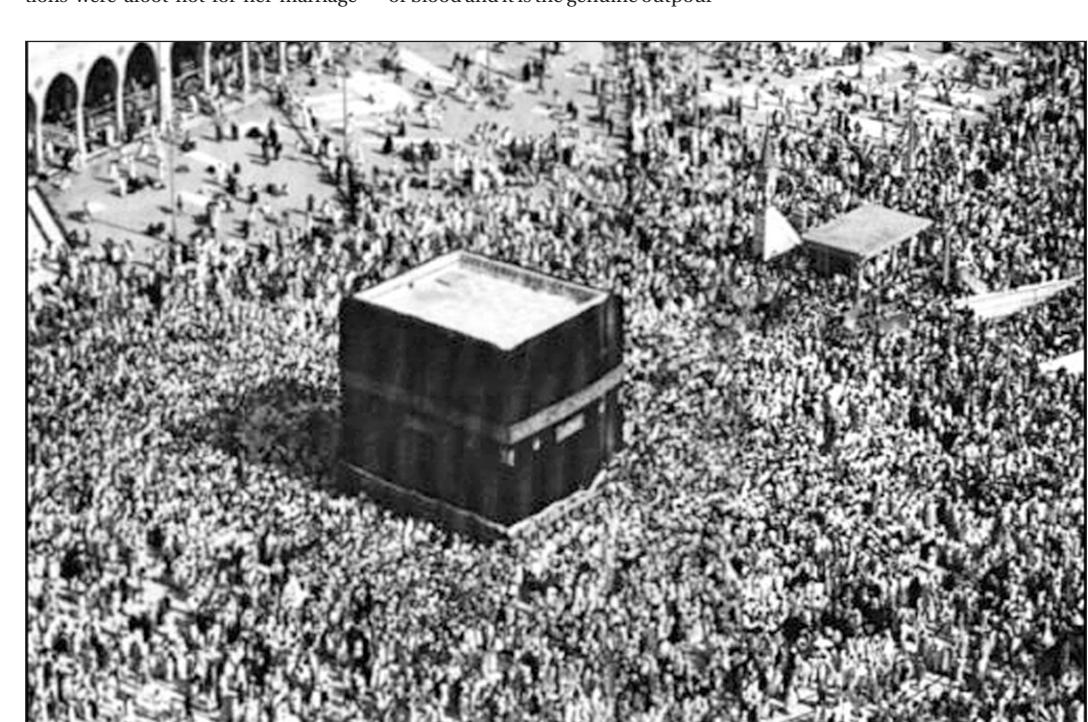
'Eid-ul-Azha', promising an occasion of joy and happiness, pleasure and gaiety, provides us with a unique opportunity to receive the Divine Mercy and Reward through sacrifice, patience and constancy. It will really be unfortunate if we fail to rise to the occasion in true spirit and try to celebrate this historic occasion through mere fun and merry-making and through so-called sacrifices of cattle. Mere purchasing of a cow or a goat only a few days before the festival and slaughtering it on the tenth of Dhul-Hijja does not and cannot pay befitting homage to the sacred incident of a devoted father's glorious attempt at slaying the bone of his bone, the heart of his heart -- his dearest son. What is needed on this glorious occasion is sacrifice from inside our hearts and not merely from our purses. As already stated, Allah does not delight in flesh or blood and it is the genuine outpour-

ings from the hearts, firm in constancy and patient perseverance, that please Benign Providence. What is more, through the system of denying ourselves the greater part of food derived from the sacrificed cattle for the sake of the poor brethren, our symbolic act finds practical expression in benevolence, and that exactly is the virtue to be taught.

'Eid-ul-Azha' indeed is a festival with a difference. Each and every Muslim should try his or her level best to celebrate this auspicious occasion every year in a befitting way. It is the singer and not the song that matters. What Allah expects on this sacred occasion is giving of our whole being to Him. It is by the mention of Allah's Name that an animal is sacrificed by a Muslim. It is not an empty mention of a word that the Muslims make, their very hearts should tremble at the very mention of the Holy Name. Each Muslim should bear in mind that if he sacrifices an animal over which he has full control momentarily, how much more necessary it is that he should lay down his life in the Way of Allah, who is not only his master but also his Creator and Sustainer.

Lastly, it is the righteous whom Islam requires to sacrifice. The Holy Quran testifies: "Surely God doth accept of the sacrifice of those who are righteous." (5:30) Islam indeed calls for the resipiscence, the change to a better frame of mind, the coming into spiritual reconciliation with the Creator by means of righteousness. What Islam teaches through the sacrifice of animals on Eid-ul-Azha in memory of the Great Sacrifice is the lesson of laying down of our lives in the cause of truth and justice.

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The history of Abraham's sacrifice

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THE figure of Abraham is equally revered in Judeo-Christian and Muslim traditions as the common ancestor of the major monotheist faiths. However, modern Biblical scholarship has raised questions about the sources of the sacrifice of Abraham's son. In particular, some modern scholars believe that in one of the original versions of the Biblical story, Abraham may really have sacrificed his son. This is in agreement with other texts asserting the practice of child sacrifice in early Israel. However, later Israelite religion seemingly abandoned the practice of child sacrifice, and this change resulted in the sacrifice story that we are now familiar with. These developments will have important implications for a modern understanding of Abraham and the evolution of monotheist religions in general.

The story of Abraham's sacrifice as it appears in the Qur'an is as follows: "And he said to all the Muslims; it is commemorated every year by Eid-ul-Azha. The Qur'anic story is given below:

So we gave him (Abraham) tidings of a great son. And when he was old enough to walk with him, he said, 'O my dear son, I have seen in a dream that I must sacrifice you. So look, what do you think?' He said, 'Oh my father! Do that which you are commanded. God willing, you will find me at the steadfast. Then, when they had both surrendered and he had flung him down upon his face, We called to him, O Abraham! You have already fulfilled the vision... Then We ransomed him with a tremendous victim. (Qur'an 37:101-107)

Now, let us look at the Biblical sacrifice story. The consensus of modern Biblical scholarship is that the sacrifice story in the Hebrew Bible is composed from a number of different sources. One is the E source (so called because it refers to God by the name Elohim, usually translated simply as "God"), which is given below.

And it was after all these things, and God tested Abraham. And He said to him, 'Abraham'. And he said, 'I'm here'. And He said, 'Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and make him a burnt offering there on one of the mountains that I'll say to you.' And Abraham got up early in the morning and harnessed his ass and took his two young men with him and Isaac, his son. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and he got up and went to the place that God had said to him. On the third day, and Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. And Abraham said to his young men, 'Sit here with me; and I and the boy; we'll go over there, and we'll bow, and we'll come back to you.' And Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on Isaac, his son, and took the fire and the knife in his hand. And the two of them went together. And Isaac said to Abraham, 'his father; and he said, 'My father'. And he said, 'I'm here, my son.' And he

said, 'Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?' And Abraham said, 'God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son.' And the two of them went together. And they came to the place that God had said to him. And Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and he bound Isaac, his son, and put him on the altar on top of the wood. And Abraham put out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. (E from Genesis 22:1-10)

At this point the Biblical text changes from E to a different source, usually called R or RJE (for Redactor, the source which edits the E and J sources). It is only at the end of the story that the Biblical text switches back to the E source, which continues as follows:

And He said, 'I swear to you, my son, that I'll bless you and multiply your seed like the stars of the skies and like the sand that's on the seashore, and your seed will possess in enemies' gate. And all the nations of the world will be blessed through your seed because you listened to my voice.' And Abraham went back to his young men, and they got up and went together to Beersheba, and Abraham lived in Beersheba. (E from Genesis 22:15-19)

The above E story is quite remarkable; it seems that in the E version of this story, Abraham really did sacrifice his son. The evidence that Abraham's son was killed is outlined in Richard Elliott Friedman's book, *The Bible With Sources Revealed* (HarperCollins 2003). Firstly, the whole replacement of Abraham's son by an alternative sacrificial animal is absent from E; it only happens in RJE. Secondly, God says that Abraham "didn't withhold" his son, implying that Isaac was actually killed (in the absence of a ram-replacement narrative). Thirdly, E says that Abraham "went back to his young men"; a phrase which excludes Isaac, who is always mentioned separately. But at the end of the above narrative there is no mention of Isaac, even though Abraham had said both of them would return ("we'll come back to you"). The image of Abraham going back to his young men (presumably servants or slaves) without Isaac is reinforced by the omission of the previously-used phrase "And the two of them went together"; this explicitly includes both Abraham and his son, but it is missing from the end of the story. Finally, after this story Isaac never appears in the E source again, and in fact God's final words to Abraham in the E passage above seem to establish that Abraham's "seed" was "multiplied" through new children explicitly to replace the loss of Isaac. Abraham's central place in the Bible, as the ancestor of the Israelite nation, is thus seemingly bound up in the offering of Isaac as a child sacrifice.

The above conclusions regarding the original E story are

surprising to say the least. However, many modern scholars are inclined to accept the picture it paints of child sacrifice as it agrees with practices mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, for example in the following:

Ahab... reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. He did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord, as his ancestor David had done, but he... made offerings in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and made his sons pass through fire, according to the abominable practices... (2 Chronicles 21:3-7)

The above passage shows that the narrator of the book of Chronicles probably dates from a later period in Israelite history, by which time child sacrifice has been abandoned as an "abominable practice". A similar later-dated, anti-child sacrifice view may well have been the motivation of the insertion of the following text from the RJE source into midst of the E passages quoted above:

And an angel of Yahweh called to him from the skies and said, 'Abraham! Abraham!' And he said, 'I'm here.' And he said, 'Don't put your hand out toward the boy, and don't do anything to him, because now I know that you fear God, and you didn't withhold your son, your only one, from me.' And Abraham raised his eyes and saw, and here was a ram behind, caught in the thicket by its horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and made it a burnt offering instead of his son. (RJE, from Genesis 22:11-14)

The evolution of religious ideas taking place over the history of the Abraham story are noteworthy. During this evolution, the idea of child sacrifice was abandoned. This is in itself an important development, but it is more remarkable for the new ideas that it then allowed. The first was a more compassionate conception of God, which no longer required believers to commit barbaric acts of child sacrifice. The second was just as important; in asserting that children (and by extension other innocent people) could not be killed for God's sake, monotheist religion could begin to develop humanist concepts regarding the value and sacredness of human life. While these may seem trivial from a modern perspective, a little thought will show how close we still are to the religious ideas of E's Abraham story. Radical groups producing brainwashed suicide bombers from adolescents are not far away from the old practice of child sacrifice. Nor are those encouraging attacks on Ahmadiyya, or other minorities paying much attention to the humanist aspects of monotheist religions.

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we are sacrificing Halal (sanctioned by the religion) beasts in the name of religion, at the instance of Abraham (Hazrat Ibrahim) who was about to slaughter his beloved son, as he was ordained in his dream by Almighty Allah. But how many of us have attained Taqwa (revolutionary spirit of Islam) and given up evil habits and bestial propensity in our life?

Moreover, while we are slaughtering the beasts, we could not slaughter the beasts of the mind. To make the matter worse, the rich people are becoming richer and the poor poorer.

Eid-ul-Azha or Qurbani is the symbol of sacrifice. It needs no telling that we, the Bengalees are a self-forgetful nation. What is all the more painful and sad is very many of us have strayed away from the path of rectitude. Most of us are rendering lip-service to Islam. Our words are not in conformity with our deeds.

Culture is the way of life of a nation. It finds expression in the history and tradition, name and nomenclature, customs and calendar, in a nutshell in the very outlook and attitude of life. What do we see today in our society? Our cultural identity is in jeopardy. We are, day in and day out, swimming with the swift current of western way of life and life-style. Is not a use pouring down water on the top of a tree that has been struck at the very root.

We, the Muslims, had once reached the pinnacle of glory in the realm of science, art, and culture. But by a strange irony of fate, we have fallen into the deep valley of decay and degradation. The Muslims, world over are having a very hard time. They are disunited and wallowing in internal dissensions and depravity, petty quarrels and frivolity, ignorance and backward-looking attitude.

What is the use of performing our prayers, observing fast, celebrating Eids and going on to pilgrimage while our society and the country is going from bad to worse? According to the sayings of the holy Prophet (SM) -- prayer is a light, charity is a proof, patience is a lamp, fasting is a shield and Qurbani is the symbol of sacrifice.

Year after year we are keeping fast during Holy Ramadan, year after year

Reverence of piety for Merciful Allah

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

BEFORE going into details it would be worthwhile to recall here what our holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh) once said on the importance and significance of holy Eid-ul-Azha. He observed (i) There is nothing dearer to Lord Creator Almighty Allah than the occasion of Eid-ul-Azha, (ii) People who can afford to sacrifice on the occasion of Eid-ul-Azha suitable animal, but do not do so, they should not come to my prayer mat (Jainamaz). In other words those people are not true followers of the holy Prophet (pbuh). It is a matter of great regret that most of our total Muslim population of 12 crores here do not fully realise the real significance and importance of Eid-ul-Azha. Society would have been surely a better place to live in if they could do so.

One of the few distinguished Prophets' (pbuh) name mentioned in the Holy Quran is Hazrat Ibrahim Khalilullah. The term Khalilullah means "Friend of Allah". Lord Creator Allah Rabbul Alameen one day wanted to know how much reverence and love Hazrat Ibrahim had for his Creator. Almighty Allah commanded him to sacrifice his dearest thing in the whole world in the name of his Creator. After pondering over the matter he realised his beloved young son Hazrat Ismail when His "Bandas" (servants) would meticulously carry out His commandments indicated in various Ayats of the Holy Qur'an. But it is a matter of great regret that most of our people attach greater importance to their own delight not sacrifice. In this context it would be worthwhile to refer to another very Quranic Ayat, that is, Ayat nos. 4-5 of Sura Maun or Sura Nebyor. Nebyor Needs of the Noble Qur'an. In these Ayats Benign Allah says:

"So, woe to the worshippers who are neglectful of their Prayers, those who (want but) to be seen (of men), but

refuse (to supply) (even) neighbourly needs." This certainly cautions us that we must take care of our poor and indigent neighbours.

We should not also be so much careful about our riches and children that we would be totally unmindful of the needs of our poor brethren. In this connection I may refer to Ayat 9 of Sura Munafiqun and Ayat 7 of Sura Hadid (Iron) of the holy Qur'an. Ayat 9: "O ye who believe! Let not your riches and children divert you from the remembrance of Allah. If any acts thus the loss is their own. Ayat 7: Believe in Allah and His Messengers, and spend of that wherewith He has made you trustees, and such of you as believe and spend (right) theirs will be a great reward."

This clearly and unmistakably indicates that a person may be a billionaire but he cannot claim that he is the actual owner of his money and wealth for he has earned his money by the "sweat of his brow". He must not forget that he is merely a trustee or custodian of the wealth he has earned as indicated in the said Quranic Ayat. As desired by Benign Allah the poor and helpless people of the society must be given at least a small portion of the moneyed man's wealth. The poor, needy and indigent are also human beings. They are Lord Creator's supreme creation ("Ashrafaul