

## Fasting in Islam

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**F**ASTING during the sacred month of *Ramadan* is obligatory for every Muslim provided that he or she is an adult and in full possession of his or her faculties. It is considered to be one of the five pillars of Islam. The holy Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Islam is built on five pillars: the *shahada* (profession of faith) that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, *salat* (prayers), *zakat* (alms-tax), *the sawm* (fast) of *Ramadan* and *hajj* (pilgrimage).

The fast of *Ramadan* commences with the sighting of the new moon and ends when the new moon of the next month of *Shawal* is seen. The *Ramadan* fast was first prescribed on the second Monday of the month of *Shaban* in the second year of the Hegira.

According to Ibn Kathir, the Muslim fast went through three stages of development until it reached its present state.

When the holy Prophet (pbuh) came to Madinah, he used to fast three days every month with addition to the Day of *Ashura*. As things were, when they first arrived in Madinah, fasting more than three days every month was not required.

Ibn Abbas reported that the holy Prophet (pbuh) had noticed that the Jews in Madinah observed the fast on the Day of *Ashura* (the tenth of *Muharram*). The holy Prophet (pbuh) asked the reason for it and was told that God delivered Moses and his people on this memorable day from their enemy. Moses (pbuh) therefore observed it as a day of fasting, whereupon the holy Prophet (pbuh) told the Jews: "Moses is closer to me than he is to you."

He then observed the day as a fast and instructed the Muslims to fast upon it. He sent out a man to tour Madinah on that day and announce to the Muslims that: "He who had already eaten shall abstain the rest of the day and he who had not, shall fast the day. Today is the Day of *Ashura*."

The second stage begins when Allah, in His infinite Mercy, pre-

scribed the Fast of *Ramadan* in the second year of the Hegira. When the *Ramadan* fast was prescribed through the revelation of verses 183 to 187 of Sura *Al-Baqara* (Chapter II), the fast on other days were abolished.

The holy Prophet (pbuh) said: "The fast of *Ramadan* has abolished every other fast." But Hazrat Ayisha *Siddiqah* (RA) reported that the holy Prophet (pbuh) also said, "Whoever wishes may fast upon it (the Day of *Ashura*), and whoever wishes may drop it."

The third stage deals with the period of abstinence and indulgence – there were times of abstinence during the night as well as during the day. When a man had said his *Isha* prayers, he was supposed to abstain from *Musirat* (i.e. food, drink and sex) after prayers.

If a man slept (even before saying the *Isha* prayers) he had to abstain to wake him. The mere saying of *Isha salat* and sleep forced a man into a state of abstinence for the rest of the night and the following day until sunset.

To provide mankind with the much-needed relaxation from the rigidity and hardship, *Rahmanur Rahim* revealed the verse: "It is lawful for you on the night of the fast to go unto your wives; they are your garments and you are their garments. Allah knows that you defraud yourselves therein, so He turns towards you and forgives you. So go unto them and seek what Allah has ordained for you, and eat and drink until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct from the black thread, then observe the fast till night-fall."

Although 'fasting' and 'rozah' are synonymous words, there is a gulf of difference between them. *Rozah* is a Persian word; its equivalent in Arabic is *sawm*. *Rozah* or *sawm* must not be equated with mere abstention from food and drinks. *Al-Siyam* (*siyam* is the plural of *sawm*) is something much more sublime, more solemn than mere fasting. "It is an armour," declares the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), "with which one protects oneself."

(Bukhari).

*Rozah* calls for full exercise of self-restraint on all the senses and limbs, a total and absolute control on all evil acts and unbridled thoughts – not only control of wrath, malice, arrogance, greed, jealousy, hatred and enmity but of all indecent and unholy dreams and desires.

The holy Prophet (pbuh) ordains: "So let not him act in an ignorant manner; and if a man quarrels with him, he should say twice, 'I am fasting.'" (Bukhari) Abu Huraira (RA) testifies that the Apostle of Allah (pbuh) said: "He who does not give up falsehood and act according to it, Allah has no need of his giving up his food and drinks." (Bukhari)

It is really unfortunate that incorrect or misleading interpretations are sometimes given for religious matters like *Ramadan*. In a recent publication entitled *Islam* by A.S. Tritton it has been wrongly claimed: "Muhammad instituted a fast on the tenth day of the first month soon after his arrival in Medinah, but a year and half later, he cancelled this and ordered the fast during the whole of the ninth month *Ramadan*."

This is indeed a dangerous and misleading interpretation. The holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is the Messenger of Allah and therefore in imparting fundamental religious teachings, there is no question of his ordaining things suo motto.

The Holy Quran has explicitly declared that in preaching the message of Allah, the holy Prophet (pbuh) did never speak of his own will: "Nor doth he speak of (his own) desire. It is naught save inspiration that is inspired."

*Ramadan* is derived from the word *Ramz* which means "to burn," "to scorch." A rozdar in the holy month of *Ramadan* tries his best to "burn" all his evil thoughts and indecent acts in the flame of *Taqwa* and self-restraint.

The emotional exuberance and selfish recklessness of his sinful life shed many of its leaves and petals in the spiritual hot blasts of the unique austerity known as *Sawm*. Cleansing his body and soul through the "scorching" but sublime "heat" of *rozah*, a Muslim turns himself into a *Rameez*, a person ready for "the

bliss of the touch of the One in the play of the many."

*Al-Siyam* or fasting in Islam means to refrain from certain things (not merely food and drinks) forbidden by the Islamic law. It is divided into two main categories: The *farz* or the obligatory fasting, and the *tatawwu* or the voluntary fasting. The *farz* fasting comprises the *Ramadan* fasting, the *kaffara* or the fasting of atonement and the *naadr* related to the taking of a vow.

Islam introduced a new meaning, a new vision, a new idea and a new spirit into the institution of fasting. For the first time in history, fasting was blessed with a systematic regulation, a scientific method, and a noble justification. In the days before the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) fasting meant the suffering of some privation in the hours of mourning and sorrow.

Islam introduced a revolutionary innovation. *Al-Siyam* stood not for mere suffering or abstinenace but for an institution for the uplift and spiritual evolution of the human soul. A Muslim fast never indicates mere abstinenace from food and drink and sex, and fasting in Islam is never meant for self-torture.

It is undoubtedly stricter than other fasts, but it also provides alleviations for special circumstances. The restraint from the animal instincts for food, drink and sex enables the attention of man or woman to be directed to higher and nobler aspects.

Fasting in the light of Islam helps him or her overcome lust and thereby sets us at the mouth of the road leading to perfection – perfection to be achieved through *Taqwa* and *Tarawwi*, prayers and penance, contemplations and acts of charity, not of the showy kind, but by seeking out those really in need.

The *Taqwa* or self-restraint indeed has to be a voluntary effort comprising the elements of caution, alertness and fear of Allah. Benign providence really loves this glorious and voluntary effort by his *bandsa*. In the words of the holy Apostle of God: "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).

*Al-Siyam* or the fasting during the holy month of *Ramadan*, one of the five pillars or *Arkan* of Islam, is obligatory for every adult 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 childbirth 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 testifies: "Allah does not want to put you to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete prescribed period to glorify Him in that He has guided you; and perchance ye shall be grateful." (2:185).

Imam Ghazzali (RA), the famous scholastic divine and the exponent of mystico-psychological ethics, claims that *Sawn* in the month of *Ramadan* represents one-fourth of faith, for the holy Prophet (pbuh) said: "Fasting is one-half of endurance," and the Apostle also said: "Endurance is one-half of faith."

Imam Ghazzali explains the special meritousness of fasting by the fact that, unlike all other devotional acts, it is visible only to Allah.

Furthermore, it is a potent means of defeating Satan. For the passions that are Satan's weapons are strengthened by eating and drinking. To beat down God's enemy is to assist God. The Holy Quran corroborates: "If ye will aid (the cause of) Allah He will aid you, and plant your feet firmly." (47:8).

The holy Prophet also said: "Were it not for the devils flying about the hearts of men, they would readily look to the kingdom of heaven. Thus, fasting becomes the 'gateway of divine service.'

Imam Ghazzali (RA), perhaps the greatest theologian of Islam, speaks of "the mysteries of the fast." The renowned orientalist Gustav Edmund von Grunebaum analyses Ghazzali's interpretation very minutely in his *Muhammadan Festivals*. "Ghazzali," writes

Grunebaum, "makes it clear that punctilious observance of the external law does not exhaust the real intention of the lawgiver."

Actually, fasting has three degrees – first, that of the common crowd which does not go beyond literal execution of the stipulations of the law. The second consists in keeping all one's senses and members (away) from sin. The third implies abstention from all aspirations regarding this world and withdrawal of the heart from everything except the Lord.

On this level the fast is broken by thinking of anything but God, the last day, and the world in relation to them. This is the station of the prophets and saints – it represents the realisation throughout life of the Koranic injunction: "Say: 'Allah,' and leave them (i.e. mankind) to plunge in vain discourse and trifling." (6:91)

The second degree, however, suffices for the pious. It demands that the believer avoid thinking of anything reprehensible and of anything that might distract him from the remembrance of God. "Five things," said the holy Prophet (pbuh), "annual the fast: a lie, backbiting, slander, a false oath, and a glance of passion."

Indecent and dishonest talk or action, hostile and hypocritical behaviour must be avoided – concentration on the name of Allah and the recitation of the Holy Quran is fast of the tongue. Nor may you listen to discussion of evil; what must not be said must not be listened to. When the physical fast is broken, the normal measure of food should not be exceeded.

Over-eating at night will but strengthen the passions fasting is designed to curb. The contemplation of the kingdom of heaven is not possible when there is a barrier of food between chest and heart, nor does an empty table suffice to lift the barrier as long as the faster's aspiration swerves from God.

Like the pilgrim (on the sacred occasion of *Hajj*), the faster should remain in suspense between fear and hope, since he does not know if his *rozah* will be accepted. Man's position is between animal and angel. (But by making him vicegerent, God exalted him in posse even higher than the angels, for the angels had to make obeisance to him).

The Holy Quran testifies: "We have indeed created man in the best of moulds, then do we abase him to be the lowest of the low except such as believe and do righteous deeds."

"(95:4-6). Each time he succumbs to passion his position is lowered, each time he overcomes it, he rises toward the angles (and even above the angels).

Therefore, it has been said: "How many fasters there are for whom only hunger and thirst are the results of their fast!" No wonder, Abu Huraira (RA) reported God's Messenger (pbuh) as saying: "Many a one who prays during the night gets nothing from his night prayers but wakefulness."

*Al-Siyam* in the holy month of *Ramadan* is indeed something unique. It enjoys in the eyes of Allah a divine grace unparalleled by any other act of piety and worship.

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The last and greatest Prophet of Allah (pbuh) said: "A man's work belongs to him in the best of moulds, then do we abase him to be the lowest of the low except such as believe and do righteous deeds."

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ABDUL BAYES

**D**URING the last decades or so, the institutional support to the ultra poor in Bangladesh underwent major changes in terms goals and delivery mechanisms. Thus, relief programs were transformed into development programs; ration price subsidies were converted to targeted food distribution, and more importantly perhaps, NGOs and micro-finance institutions were given the responsibility of implementing some of the safety nets programs. The empirical studies done so far call for scaling up, improving efficiency and putting the poor above the poverty line on a sustainable basis.

### Safety nets

We can possibly mention about 4 such programs for 2006 covering 830, 840 beneficiaries with 3.72 million family members. For example, there are Income-Generating Vulnerable Group Development (IGVGD) and Food Security

both? Or, what are the perceptions of the recipients about the impacts of such programs on their socio-economic development?

To answer to the abovementioned questions, The World Food Program (WFP), The Department for International Development (DFID) and The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) organised a day-long deliberations recently. We reckon that the research on the programs is needed on the heels of declining resources for the targeted food assistance programs from donors and the government.

The programs, however, differ in terms of the mode of operation and size of transfer. For example, IGVGD transfers only food, FSVGD and FFA provide food plus cash while RMP supports through cash only. As far as safety nets programs in Bangladesh are concerned, the relevant questions are cost-effectiveness and sustainability.

For example, had the nets been "safe" and "sound" for the poor in terms of socio-economic uplift? Which channel of the transfers is more cost effective – cash, kind or

The main message that seemingly

follows is that safety nets have been "safe" (if not "sound"), at least temporarily, in keeping the ultra poor on an even keel. They are safe as the targeted poor enjoy a relief from the pernicious poverty syndromes. But the programs do not seem to be sound as the poor remain vulnerable and subject to a fall-back.

Let us dwell on the issues by picking up few of the positive outcomes. According to the researchers, compared to the control groups, the participant households reaped home a better income. However, a combination of food and cash transfers from the FSVGD had the highest impacts in increasing income.

Program transfers reduced extreme poverty by 15-30 percentage points – the highest from FSVGD followed by IGVGD, RMP and FFA. This consolable condition should be pitted against pervasive poverty ranging 48-64 per cent across various transfer modes to argue that the programs could not make a dent to the poverty impasse.

All programs had increased the

value of consumption assets compared to control groups – the highest impacts from FSVGD followed by IGVGD and others. The average value of livestock and poultry assets also increased for households.

The average amount of savings was much higher in participant households compared to the counterparts control groups. FSVGD and IGVGD programs increased household income at relatively much lower costs indicating their edge in terms of cost-effectiveness.

Marrried women's empowerment outcomes improve more, the higher the proportion of transfers received in cash. May be, receipt of cash by women enhances their control on resources hitherto been out of their reach and increased their decision making roles.

Participants in all four programs witnessed statistically significant increase in food expenditure.

Participants raised household per capita consumption by 164-271 kcal per person per day. The food interventions that provide rice

(IGVGD and FFA) have larger effect on men's caloric intake relative to women while just the reverse holds when the intervention provides flour. That is, the use of a less preferred food – atta in this case – increase the share of the food going to women relative to men.

Among the different forms of transfer, the biggest improvement in food security of the extreme poor is achieved through atta transfer – also assumed to be technically better suited for micronutrient fortification than rice or wheat. By and large, the programs had positive impacts on the ultra poor, although, because of the differences in transfer size and program objectives food and cash combination performed better than a mono policy – either cash or food only.

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researchers then tell us about an interesting case: the total costs of eliminating extreme poverty for 830, 840 beneficiary households would have been Tk. 1,315 crore in 2006 (but the total transfer was Tk. 507 crore at that period).

For the same households, the IGVGD program, which has national coverage could completely eliminate extreme poverty at an annual cost of Tk. 1,203 crore – at 9 per cent less cost. But remember that these estimates are based on short-term impacts of the programs and those up the line could easily drop below after the programs are over.

### Safeguards