

Fasting in Islam

SYED ASHRAF ALI

FASTING 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 Ramadhan 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 *Ashoura*. 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 *Ashoura* (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 *Ashoura*."

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 Ramadhan has abolished every other fast." But Hazrat Ayesha Siddiqah (RA) reported that the holy Prophet (pbuh) also said, "Whoever wishes may fast upon it (the Day of *Ashoura*), 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 *Mustirat* (i.e food, drink and sex) after prayers.

If a man slept (even before saying the *Isha* prayers) he had to abstain when he awoke. 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 'ro'zah' are synonymous words, there is a gulf of difference between them. *Rozah* is a Persian word; its equivalent in Arabic is *saum*. *Rozah* or *saum* must not be equated with mere abstinence from food and drinks. *Al-Siyam* (*siyam* is the plural of *saum*) 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 of 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 indeed is 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 ro'zdar in the holy month of *Ramadan* tries his best to "burn" all his evil thoughts and indecent acts in the flame of *Taqwa* or 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 ro'zah, 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 *nadh*r 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 abstinence but for an institution for the uplift and spiritual evolution of the human soul. A Muslim fast never indicates mere abstinence 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 *banda*. 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 the uplift, 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 meritoriousness 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 *Muhammadian 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 *Haji*), the faster should remain in suspense between fear and hope, since he does not know if his *rozah* will be accepted. Man's



PHOTO: AFP

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 fasts gets nothing from fasting but hunger and thirst, and

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. According to a *Qudsi Hadith* (utterances attributed to Allah outside the Holy Quran).

The last and greatest Prophet of Allah (pbuh) said: "A man's work belongs to him. Every good deed a son of Adam does will be multiplied, a good deed receiving a tenfold to seven hundredfold reward. Allah has said: "With the exception of fasting, for it is done for My sake. fasting belongs to Me and I repay." (Bukhari and Muslim).

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

On safety nets and safeguards

ABDUL BAYES

DURING 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

Vulnerable Group Development (FSVGD) programs. These are treated as the components of Vulnerable Group Development or VGD. Also available are Food for Asset Creation (FFA) and Rural Maintenance Program (RMP).

The programs are targeted mostly for the women in destitution. Besides transfers in terms of food and cash or both, some of programs also help women to have access to credit, training and other facilities. All the programs perform for 24 months excepting, of course, RMP with 48 months.

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

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.

However, we shall draw upon the study on the efficacy of the programs carried out by Dr. Akhter U-Ahmed, Agnes Quisumbing, J.Hoddinott of IFPRI and their associates in Bangladesh. Based on a sound methodology and large sample size, the study invokes interesting insights for policy makers as well as development partners. Allow me to submit some of the interesting observations.

Success story

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 perilous 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 percent-age 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.

Married 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 mens' 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.

Elevation and elimination

Among the 4 programs that Akhter et al. dealt with, former IGVGD, FFA and RMP households reported to have sustained increased income even beyond the transfer period. This implies that the program impacts had been sustainable. The

modern America. As a result, they're better equipped to fight discrimination and gain respect as a minority.

America's tradition of embracing immigrants has made it easier for the diverse Muslim community -- including Arabs, South Asians as well as white and African-American converts -- to become part of a vast melting pot of religions, cultures and ethnic groups. Europe's small, culturally homogenous nations still find it difficult to extend a warm welcome to immigrants who, for their part, tend to retain native languages and customs, clustering in small enclaves with compatriots.

Respect for minorities is just climbing up the EU's political agenda. The German government for decades treated its 3 million Turkish population as "guest workers" requiring no special attention and expected to return home. When disaffected young African and Arab youths in France took to the streets in the "banlieues" of Paris in summer 2005 to protest unemployment and discrimination, President Nicolas Sarkozy, then the country's interior minister, denounced them as "racaille," or "scum." A limited outcry met his comments. Anti-immigrant

rhetoric is also the norm in once-tolerant Dutch and Danish societies.

For many Muslims, practicing their faith is easier in the US than in Europe. More religious than mainly secular Europeans, Americans are less uneasy about public displays of faith and religious symbols like headscarves, banned in French state schools and some German regional government offices. The debate over the role of women in Islam raging among US Muslims -- with some women fighting segregation in mosques and using faith-based arguments to reclaim women's rights -- has yet to reach Europe.

While starting to group together on a national level, Muslims in Europe have yet to forge an EU-wide alliance to match the clout of pan-American organisations such as the Islamic Society of North America, headed by Canadian-born Ingrid Mattson, or the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

American Muslims may feel targeted by the October 2001 Patriot Act, which increased power of law-enforcement agencies to fight terrorism, but organisations lobbying for Muslims and other professional and civil-liberties

groups ensure that Muslims have no need to withdraw from the mainstream.

Most significantly, under the watch of moderate, thoughtful religious and community leaders, American Muslims show little sympathy for radical views. In contrast, European security services have identified mosques as central in the spread of radical Islamist ideologies and the recruitment of homegrown and foreign-born terrorists in Britain, France and the Netherlands.

One problem is that EU governments have traditionally allowed Saudi Arabia and other conservative governments to fund mosques and imams in Europe, and evidence suggests that Al Qaeda recruiters infiltrated some mosques. As highlighted by a recent BBC survey, a majority of imams in Britain, from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan possess limited English and fail to provide a modern interpretation of the faith suited to a Western multicultural democracy.

Given such divides, EU policymakers and European Muslims often insist they can learn little from the US experience.

Certainly, America's tradition as an immigrant melting pot cannot be transposed to Europe. As evidenced by heated EU debate on membership of mainly Muslim Turkey, most Europeans are also unlikely to lose their chronic fear of Islam.

But to avoid further alienation and violence, EU governments and Muslims in Europe must step off the beaten track and chart a new course for speeding Muslims' integration into the mainstream. This may require discussion of the so-far taboo question of affirmative action for Europe's Muslim minority.

More importantly, instead of turning to Arab and other Islamic nations to discuss European Muslims, EU governments should examine how the US government, society and business tackle the challenge.

Shada Islam is a senior program executive at the European Policy Centre. She writes for YaleGlobal Online in a personal capacity.

© Yale Center for the Study of Globalization. All rights reserved. Reprinted by arrangement.

Muslims and the tale of two continents

SHADA ISLAM

MUSLIMS in Europe are once again in the spotlight -- this time because of German police foiling a terrorist plot hours after Danish authorities arrested Muslim youth for plotting attacks. These also follow a failed plot in June, to explode car bombs in central London and Glasgow International Airport.

The botched attacks, following the terrorist scare at British airports in summer 2006 and suicide attacks on London's transport system in 2005, prompted British Prime Minister Gordon Brown to promise tighter border controls and resurrect controversial proposals to extend pre-charge detention times for terrorism suspects.

Significantly, Brown also promised to eradicate extremism among increasingly alienated young British Muslims, an initiative that echoes wider-ranging European Union efforts to counter violent radicalization of young Muslims across the 27-nation bloc.

Brown and other EU leaders face a tough task. While most of Europe's estimated 20 million Muslims are fully integrated, law-

abiding citizens with little sympathy for radical views, others are frustrated with government policies that keep them on the fringes of the mainstream.

Originally from poor, rural backgrounds, a high proportion of Europe's Muslims came to the continent to labor in coal mines and steel mills during the 1960s and 1970s and remained at the bottom of the economic pile, ignored by politicians and business leaders while facing discrimination in housing, schools and labor markets.

European governments' failure to tackle these problems, combined with tough counter-terror measures and the rise of xenophobic parties, have heightened the sense of alienation felt by many Muslims in Europe. Muslims' search for refuge in conservative Islamic values has prompted friction with Europe's traditional secular liberalism and, in some cases aided by foreign-trained radical imams, created fertile ground for the spread of extremism in Islamic communities.

Europe's predicament causes concern across the Atlantic. Many US policymakers accuse EU gov-

ernments of ignoring the security implications of young Muslims' radicalisation and suggest that Europe could learn from America's 7 million Muslims who, measured by educational and income levels, are far more integrated than their European counterparts.

Muslim communities in the US and Europe certainly share some similarities, and a transatlantic dialogue would be useful in promoting best practices on integration. However, American and European Muslims face different challenges, reflecting their distinct composition, history and experience.

After the devastating 9/11 terror attacks in 2001, Muslims in both the US and Europe fell under close scrutiny, a condition that binds the two communities together. Muslims on both sides of the Atlantic tackle hard-line policies of suspicious governments, combat public prejudice and counter criticism of their faith as repressive and cruel. This in turn has prompted an eagerness among Muslims in both the US and Europe to assert their "Islamic identity."

Despite pressures to conform to Western appearance and values, women in both communities

increasingly wear headscarves, and a growing number of young adults attend mosques. In addition, US policy in the Middle East is a constant, painful irritant for Muslims of both continents.

Despite their common struggle against prejudice, however, US and European Muslims live in two markedly different worlds, largely because of income. Most American Muslims are well-educated, affluent and politically active. "They are better off than the average US citizen," notes Philippa Strum of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington.

Almost 60 per cent are college educated, 52 per cent have an income of \$50,000 or more and 82 per cent of those eligible say they are registered to vote. In contrast, "Muslims in Europe belong to the underclass of Europe," says Jocelyn Cesari, an expert on Islam in Europe.

Savvy American Muslims are way ahead of their European coreligionists in terms of social standing and political clout. More active as a community, they have access to enlightened leaders and engaged in energetic, often heated debate on reconciling Islam and