

Eid-ul-Fitr

SYED ASHRAF ALI

Eid-ul-Fitr is a comparatively new festival, and not as old as Eid-ul-Azha. Whereas Eid-ul-Azha, commemorating the glorious sacrifices of the Prophets Ibrahim and Ismail (peace be upon them), goes back to the days of yore in the eighteenth century before Christ. Eid-ul-Fitr originated in the 7th century A.D. In fact, Eid-ul-Fitr is the newest major festival amongst the celestial religions.

Eid-ul-Fitr was not known to the Muslims till the Holy Hijrat to the then Yathrib (no Medina) in 622 A.D. After His Hijrat to Medina, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) found the people there regularly celebrating two festivals of Persian origin -- the Mihirjan and the Nawroze on the nights of the full moon of spring and autumn, respectively.

The way these two festivals were celebrated in then Arabia and Persia was not only highly objectionable but also not compatible with the norms and practices in Islam.

Nawroze and Mihirjan festivals celebrated by the people of Arabia prior to the Holy Prophet's (peace be upon him) hijrat to Medina were mere Arabic versions of the two great festivals of the Zoroastrians namely, Nauruz and Mihrajan respectively.

Both Nauruz, the Festival of the New Year, and Mihirjan, the Feast of Mithra, used to last six days, the number perhaps being based on the six Persian gahanbars. The first day of the new-year was called Nauruz-i-Amma ("of the people") or Kucak ("little"), and the sixth day was Nauruz-i-Hasa ("noble") or Buzurg ("great").

It was the custom of the Kisa (Persian Kings) that the King opened the Nauruz festival and then proclaimed to all that he would hold session for them, and bestow benefits upon them.

On the second day, the session was for men of high rank, and for the members of the great families. On the third day, the session was for his warriors, and for the highest Manbadh (Priests), on the fourth day, it was for his family, his relations and domestics, and on the fifth, it was for his children and clients -- when the sixth day came, and he had done justice to all of them, he celebrated Nauruz for himself and conversed only with special friends and those who were admitted into his privacy.

As in the case of Nauruz, the first day of Mihirjan was known as Mihirjan-i-Amma and the last Mihirjan-i-Hasa. As stated earlier, this festival, like Nauruz, also lasted six days. But at one period it spread over thirty days, the first five being, according to Al-Biruni, "feast days for the princes, the second for nobility, the third for



Muslims offering prayer on Eid-ul-Fitr.

the servants of the princes, the fourth for their clients, the fifth for the people, and the sixth for the herdsmen."

Thus, instead of each of the six gahanbars being represented by only one day of the festival, it was at one time honoured both at Nauruz and at Mihirjan by a period of five days.

Both Nauruz and Mihrajan were originally New Year festivals. The Avesta year originally began about the time of the autumnal equinox and, during the closing years of the reign of Darius I (522-486), it was changed to conform to the regular Babylonian year, thus commencing about the time of the vernal equinox.

The Arabs used to celebrate

Nawroze and Mihirjan from the night of the full moon of spring and autumn, respectively, almost exactly in the same way as the Persians celebrated Nauruz and Mihrajan. To both, these two occasions were of great honour and significance.

It is well illustrated by the following saying of Salman al Farsi (RA) as cited by Al-Biruni: "In Persian times we used to say that God has created an ornament for his slaves, of rubies on Nauruz, of emeralds on Mihrajan. Therefore, these two festivals excel all other days in the same way as these two jewels excel all other jewels."

The general scheme of celebration of Nawroze and Mihirjan not only laid emphasis on the artificial

differences between rich and poor, and the haves and have-nots, which was not at all compatible with the concept of equality in Islam, it also normally led people to drunken orgies, frequently ending in brawls and bloodshed. Even the Kiyan, the women practicing immoral dancing and singing, whose immorality was proverbial, used to command wide respect during celebration of these festivals, when even the great chieftains used to pay public court to them.

The Holy Prophet (pbuh) was literally shocked and surprised, and is reported to have observed: "Allah has given you two days better than these days -- the days of Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha." The age-old practice of celebration of Nawroze and Mihirjan festivals was very rightly stopped, and the Muslims started celebrating the two auspicious Eid-days -- in the mornings of which the Muslims are supposed to say a two-rakat special congregational prayer -- in right earnest.

And, as in all other prayers in Islam, there is no discrimination of race and nationality, no difference between black and white, rich and poor, wise and ignorant, slave and master, haves and have-nots, in this thanks-giving congregational prayer of Eid-ul-Fitr.

The word Eid in Arabic means "joy" and Fitr stands for "break of fast," and symbolises "return to

normalcy." Eid-ul-Fitr stands for the joy of breaking of fast or the joy of returning to normalcy.

It reaches mankind every year as a Divine Boon, with a promise of joy and happiness, culminating as it does the month-long period of Siyam and Taqwa, fasting and self-restraint, Tarawwi and I'tikaf, prayers and penance.

Eid-ul-Fitr, the day of rejoicing and offering heart-felt gratitude to Allah through Sadaqa-i-Fitr and the two-rakat congregational prayer in the morning, is indeed a great and auspicious occasion.

It is so auspicious that even women, who are always equal participants in the hardship, austerities and pleasures of Ramadan, have been told by the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) to go out and say the Eid prayers in the Eidgah.

Even the night of the Eids have special importance in the eyes of Islam. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "He who passes the night of Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha through prayers will never waver or be afraid on the Day of Judgement, while others will tremble or quiver on that fateful day."

Eid-ul-Fitr is really an exceptional occasion -- something totally different from an ordinary festival. The month-long fasting of Ramadan teaches a Muslim how to practice Taqwa or self-restraint in the most scientific way.

Sex and food and drink are prohibited for every able-bodied Muslim from dawn to dusk during this holy month, but these are permitted not only throughout the remaining eleven months but also from dusk to small hours in the night even during the month of Ramadan -- a scientific scheme, which is quite reasonable and bearable.

This hitherto unknown system not only makes hardship of self-restraint bearable but also pleasant, and the temporary renunciation makes the fulfilment of the basic desires even more pleasant. Naturally, therefore, at the end of month-long arduous Siyam and Tarawwi, Taqwa and I'tikaf, Eid-ul-Fitr reaches us that Islam is no static system of worship.

It is a living and dynamic movement of thought and action which frees men from the grip of animal instincts, from the idea of artificial differences between rich and poor, high and low, and makes them act upon Divine guidance.

It teaches us over and over again that Islam is a comprehensive code of life, a perfect "deen" which covers every aspect of life, and imposes the authority of Allah in all its dimensions, in every sphere of activity, in every domain of thought.

None can afford to ignore or fight shy of this auspicious day -- a unique Prize giving Ceremony in which the most merciful and the

most gracious Allah, in His infinite mercy, Himself distributes the prizes to the winners who have successfully practiced not merely fasting but Al-Siyam in the true sense through prayers and penance, self-restraint, and abstinence from vices in the right kiln of Islam.

According to a Qudsi Hadith, Benign Providence Himself declares: "Every man's work belongs to him. A good deed is repaid from tenfold to seven hundred times. But Fasting belongs to Me and I repay."

No Eid, however, can be successful if it is spent only through fun and frolic, pleasure and gaiety, joy and happiness. There can be no Eid for a Muslim if his neighbours remain unfed and unclothed. No orphan, no helpless person, no hapless soul on this clay of a cold star can remain unwept, un-honoured and unsung on this auspicious occasion.

Each and every hungry mouth has to be fed, every nude has to be clothed, and every neglected and despised person has to be looked after in right earnest. The very joy of Eid will be marred if the poor neighbours still remain uncared for, if the poverty-stricken near and dear ones still groan in misery and helplessness.

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

Rumi and the path

SYED REZAUL KARIM

HAZRAT Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi (b 1207), hailed as "the greatest mystic poet of the world" by the German poet philosopher Wolfgang Von Goethe for his Mathnawi and Divan-e-Kabir, was surprisingly depreciative of writing poetry. He made a remark in his Discourses (*Fihri-Mafihri*) that he spouts verses for entertaining his friends, "as if someone was to put his hand into tripe to wash it because his guests want to eat tripe. Hence it has become necessary for me to recite poems since others have wished for this."

But the Mathnawi, his magnum opus, comes up with this remarkable preface: "This is the book of the Mathnawi, which is the roots of the roots of the (Islamic) religion in respect of its unveiling the mysteries of attainment (of the truth) and of certainty; and which is the greatest science of God and the clearest (religious) way of God and the most manifest evidence of God" (translation -- Nicholson).

The late Harvard Professor of Indo-Muslim Culture, Anne Marie Schimmel remarked, "Mawlana's poetry and prose are

an attempt to circumambulate Him whose work is so evident in the universe and who has promised mankind that He will hear his prayers (Sura 60/42 Koran)."

Could it be otherwise? Did not the venerable Mawlana declare in unequivocal terms, "I am the servant of the Koran as long as I have life. I am the dust on the path of Mohammad The Chosen One." For Rumi, God is the living, self-subsisting, the supporter of all, as revealed in the Koranic verse, Ayatul Kursi.

Is it possible to know God? There is a divine Hadith, God, the Almighty says: "I was a hidden Treasure and I loved that I be known, so I created the creation so that I may be known." Rumi says: "Whatever notion you have of God, He must be something like that because He is the Creator of all of your notions." God's creatures are not like Him in any way yet they cannot be other than Him either, says Rumi.

Mawlana also explains that one can only know a thing through its opposite, and since it is unthinkable in terms of "Towhid" -- "Unity of Being" -- for God to have an opposite in substance, He remains unknowable. It is possible to acknowledge God through His manifestations -- the

created world.

"The believer manifests the attributes of faith and positive testimony to God's existence, the unbeliever also manifests God by his denial of God's existence; which provides the opposite against which faith becomes knowable." (Introduction to *Fihri-Ma-Fihri* by Thackston)

How to comprehend God? God manifests Himself in hundreds of ways, but no two are the same. Mawlana quotes the Koranic verse Ar Rahman: "Everyday in (new) splendour doth He shine" (Translated by Yusuf Ali). In time of joy there is one manifestation, in time of sorrow another, in time of fear another, and in time of hope another.

As God's acts, and the manifestation of His acts, are varied, so are the manifestations of His essence. He further says: "You too, who are God's power, appear in a thousand different ways every moment and never remain fixed in one fashion." "Reason is that which is ever restless and without peace day and night from thinking and worrying and trying to comprehend God, though God is incomprehensible and beyond our understanding."

Mawlana here imagines "reason" as a "moth" and "beloved"

as "candle." A true moth will ever immolate itself and burn in pain in the fire of the candle; likewise it will not be a true moth. The candle, in order to be true to its fire, must burn the moth. So is the dance of the reason circling around the essence of God, the Beloved.

"Before God brought this cosmos into existence by His fiat, undifferentiated souls of the potential mankind slumbered as an idea within God." Rumi tells us why we have been journeying from God to this guest house of this world by using a beautiful pun on the Arabic word "bala" (meaning "yes" in one sense and "suffering misfortune" in another).

He asked: "Am I not your Lord?" And you responded "Bala" (Yes)! How can one thank Him for that "bala" (Yes)? By "bala" (suffering misfortune)."

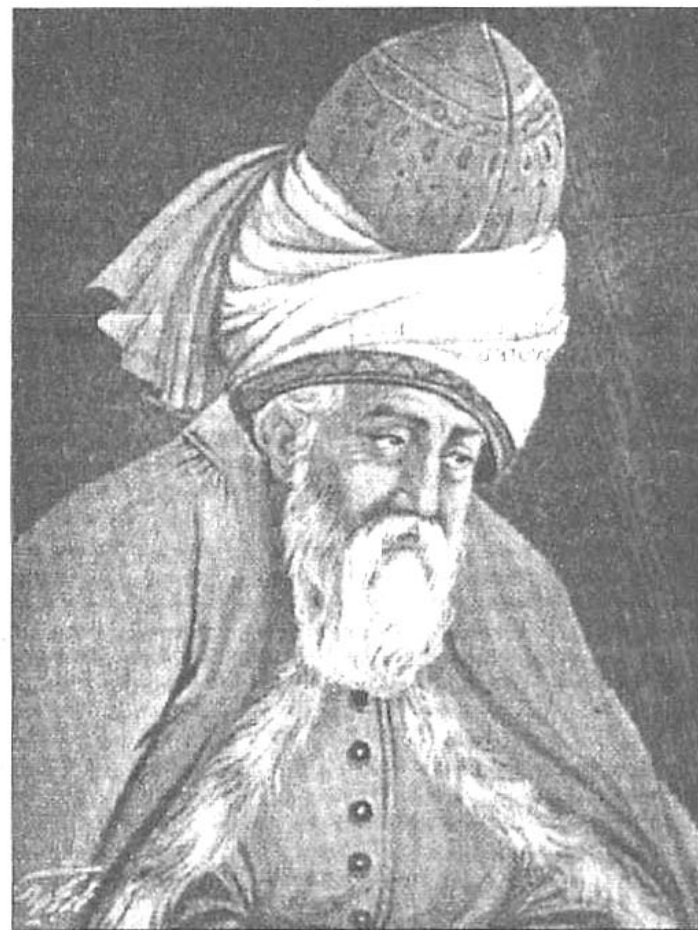
The soul that was separated from its source suffers pain for a human being's innate covenant in his conscience as well as in his quest for God after being sent to the world. Hence, the Mawlana's metaphor of a reed-flute's plaintive note to travel back to its source, The Reed Bed -- which was so beautifully penned by Rumi at the beginning of

Mathnawi -- says:

Listen to the reed, how it tells a tale complaining of separation saying "ever since I was parted from the reed bed my lament has caused man and woman to moan" (translated by Nicholson).

One has to set out and travel on the path of finding God; he or she may not know the exact destination or station but will be rewarded with the achievement of covering a distance, "whoever labours for the glory of God is never lost, though he shut both his eyes." Here, the Mawlana quotes the Koranic verse, "whoso doeth a particle of good shall see it." "You are veiled," says Mawlana, to see how far one has progressed, and at the end you will see this world as a seedbed of hereafter.

Man has the capability for spiritual development as God has breathed His "Spirit" into him, even though he shares animality with beasts and materiality with inorganic things. He, the Almighty, brought man from non existence into being, then from being into the state of minerality, and from the state of minerality into a state of vegetation, and from the state of vegetation into the state of animality,



and from animality into the state of humanity, and from humanity into the state of angelicity -- ad

infinitum. Cries Mawlana Rumi, "At what stage I was less in my development?"

"The man," says Rumi, "is the donkey into which angel's feathers were stuck in the hope of his becoming angelic." Man must, therefore, shed his animal nature in order to sharpen, and perfect his spiritual awareness. "One must abandon the ego and be born again to the spirit."

Prayer occupies a special feature in Mawlana's work. "There is no way to approach God other than prayer." Koran reveals that God created humans and jins to worship Him. But outward ritualistic prayer is just a "shell." Its "soul" is, however, unqualifiable and infinite, without beginning and without end. It is a state of total absorption and unconsciousness during which these external forms remain outside.

Mawlana sings in one of his ecstatic ghazals: "My ablution is with weeping/ thus my prayer will be fiery/And I burn the mosque's doorway when my call to prayer strike it/Is the prayer of the drunken, tell me, is this prayer valid?/For he does not know the timing and is not aware of places." (Translated by Anne Marie Schimmel).

Syed Rezaul Karim is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Sharing of one's income: A Quranic perspective

MUHAMMAD YUNUS

SINCE the earliest days of civilisation, the rich and the powerful have exploited the poor and assumed absolute ownership of their wealth. In all the major civilisations, a minority rich governed the economy while the masses toiled in poverty and deprivation. The slaves and the freeborn poor tilled the land, herded the cattle, rowed the boats that carried goodies for the rich and built the mansions and monuments that gave eternity to those in power.

All the wealth of land and sea and the produce of human craft and ingenuity belonged to the rich and they gave the poor whatever they pleased -- as little as they wished. This situation might have continued indefinitely and, who knows, may be to this date, but for the greatest revolution of all times -- the advent of the Qur'an -- some fourteen centuries ago.

At an early stage of its revelation, the Qur'an declared that the poor had a share in the wealth of the rich:

"Mankind has been created restless. He is panicky when evil befalls him, and ungrateful when something good happens, except for the prayerful, those who are regular in prayer, and in whose wealth, there is a definite (allocation) for (24) the needy and the destitute (70:19-25).

In yet another early passage the Qur'an reminds the rich of

their inborn arrogance and selfishness (90:4-8), and their propensity to keep away from the "steep path," which it describes as the freeing of slaves (90:13), feeding the destitute in famine (90:14), and helping the needy and those in distress (90:15-16).

"We have created man in distress. Does he think no one has power over him? He says, I have wasted much wealth. Does he think that no one sees him? Have we not given him two eyes, and a tongue, and a pair of lips, and shown him the two highways? But he does not brave the steep (one). And what will make you understand what the steep (one) is? (It is) the freeing of a slave, or the feeding of an orphaned kinsman during famine, or of the needy (lying) in the dust. Then he will be of those who believe, who advocate perseverance, and enjoin mercy (90:4-17)."

During the Meccan period (610-622), the Qur'an reverts to this theme in several of its verses, and commands the rich to give what is due to three classes of people:

- Qurba -- Traditionally connoted with a kinsman or relative, its epistemology permits its present day rendering as "ones own people" -- implying those people with whom we have direct dealings, including our direct employees and staff. However, since poor employees and staff fall under the needy category, we have

maintained traditional connotation in this exercise.

- Miskin (Pl. masakin) -- any needy person regardless of faith.

- Ibn as'sabil -- literally son of the road, traditionally rendered to as wayfarer (ibn as'sabil) -- a traveler who has no financial means to return home, but its epistemology permits its present day rendering as destitute -- someone having no means of livelihood.

"Those who persevere in seeking their Lord's approval, who keep up prayer and spend of what We have given them, secretly and publicly, and who repel evil with good -- such shall attain the eternal abode (13:22)."

"Give your relatives (qurba) their rightful due, and to the needy (masakin) and the destitute (ibn as'sabil), and do not squander wastefully, for those who squander are the brethren of Satan, and Satan is most ungrateful to his Lord (17:26-27)."

"Give your relatives (qurba) their rightful due, and to the needy (masakin) and the destitute (ibn as'sabil). This is best for those who seek God's approval: for its is they that shall attain to a happy state (30:38)."

"Do you see the one who rejects the din (religion/moral law)? It is this (kind of person) who rebuffs the orphan, and has no urge to feed the needy (miskin) (107:1-3)."

Come the Medinite period

(622-632), the Qur'an consistently directs the rich to their broader social responsibility, by asking them to give a generous loan to God -- an expression that obviously implies generous attitude in helping out the poor and needy financially.

"Who is it that will offer a generous loan to God, that He multiplies it for him? (Remember), God takes away as well gives plenty; and you shall be brought back to Him (2:245)."

"You who believe, spend of what we have given you before the day comes when there will be no bartering, no friendship and no intercession. As for those who deny the truth -- it is they who are evildoers (2:254)."

"Who is it that will offer a generous loan to God, that He multiplies it for him? Such shall have a noble reward (57:11)."

"Charitable men and charitable women who give a generous loan to God -- it will be multiplied for them; and they shall have a noble reward (57:18)."

"Spend out of what We have given you before death comes to any of you, and he says: 'My Lord, why not grant me a delay for a short while that I give in charity and be among the righteous' (63:10)."

"(Remember), if you give a generous loan to God, He will multiply it for you, and forgive you, for God is Appreciative, Lenient (64:17)."

The Qur'anic verses take account of the emotional and behavioural aspects and crafty machinations of the human mind to ensure that the rich do not take any advantage of their generosity and the poor are not condemned for receiving financial assistance from the rich.

The Qur'an prefers confidentiality when it comes to giving financial assistance:

"If you spend in charity openly, it is fine -- but if you keep it secret and give it to the needy, it is even better for you, and will offset for you (some of) your sins. (Remember), God is Aware of all your deeds (2:271)."

"Those who spend their wealth -- by night and by day; in secret and in public -- they have their reward with their Lord; they have nothing to fear nor will they regret (2:274)."

The Qur'an cautions against hurting the recipient's sentiments:

"Those who spend their wealth in the way of God, and do not follow up with reminders of their generosity, or with abuse -- for them the reward is with their Lord. They have nothing to fear nor will they regret (2:262)."

"Kind word and forgiveness is better than an act of charity followed by abuse. (Remember), God is self-sufficient, most gracious (2:263)."

"You who believe, do not nullify your charities with reminders of

generosity, or with abuse -- like those who spend their money only to be seen by the people ... (2:264)."

Past ill feelings must be ignored while helping others:

"Let not those of you who have been graced (with God's favour) and have abundance, swear against helping out those among their own people (qurba), the needy (masakin), and those who fled along God's way. Let them forgive and overlook. Don't you wish that God should pardon you? (Remember), God is most forgiving and most merciful (24:22)."

To help others out with only the good things:

"They ask you (O Muhammad,) what they should spend. Say: 'Whatever fair (earnings) you spend, shall be for your parents and relatives (aqarabin), and for the orphans, the needy and the destitute (ibn as'sabil). (Remember), whatever good you do, God has full knowledge thereof (2:215)."

"You who believe, spend of the good things you have earned, and from what we produce for you from the earth. And do not choose the bad things for spending (in charity), which you would not receive yourselves without averting your eyes in disdain, and know that God is self-sufficient, most worthy of praise (2:267)."

"You shall never attain to piety unless you spend (on others) what you cherish yourselves. (Remember), anything that you

spend, God has full knowledge of it (3:92)."

The Qur'an warns against overspending out of generosity:

"Spend in God's way, yet do not expose yourself to ruin by your own hands, and be generous -- for indeed, God approves of the generous (2:195)."

"Do not keep your hands bound to your neck, nor stretch it as far as it extends -- lest you find yourself blamed, and destitute (17:29)."

The Qur'an also introduced a notion of shared possession of wealth/income, complementing its call for sharing one's income with the others (4:32).

"Do not covet the bounties of God, which He has bestowed in different measures to either of you: men will have a portion of what they earn, and women will have a portion of what they earn. Ask therefore, God of His bounty, and (remember,) God knows everything (4:32)."

This verse removes the common misconception regarding absolute ownership of one's income, complements clear Qur'anic dictates on broader financial responsibilities of both men and women of the affluent class.

It, thus, requires either of the spouses in a conjugal relationship to share income, particularly with parents (2:215 above), and generally with personal relatives in need of financial support, and the needy. The verse also legitimises

state taxation as a compulsory way of sharing of income with the community, although in many Muslim countries even good practicing Muslims try to evade taxes for want of any specific Qur'anic instruction to pay income tax.

This is not all. The Quran introduced the notion of compulsory charity (sadaqa), that was later institutionalised as Zakat.

Finally, to give no benefit of doubt to those who are very particular about their prayers, the Qur'an declares:

"Woe to those prayerful (musall'in) (4), who are heedless of their prayers (5), who aim to be seen (in public) (6), but hold back from helping out (others) (107:7)."

Soul searching: Despite the Qur'an's clear exhortations on the social responsibility of the rich towards the poor and on the corporate nature of wealth, there are many rich Muslims, particularly in the developing world including this golden land, who believe in the absolute ownership of their wealth, apply foul and fraudulent means to multiply it as fast as they can, and are bent on giving the poor -- their own relatives and employees included -- as little as they can and as late as they can. It is time for all such voracious lovers of wealth to search their souls before it is too late.

Muhammad Yunus is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.