

Fasting in Islam



or reliable authority to testify to this claim.

Fasting is divided into two main categories -- (1) the *fard*, or the obligatory fasting and (2) the *tatawwu*, or the voluntary fasting. The *fard* fasting comprises the Ramadhan fasting, the *kafara*, or the fasting of atonement, and the *nadh*r relating to the taking of a vow. Allah ordains in the holy Quran: "O ye, who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint" [2:183].

Al-siam, one of the five pillars or *arkans* of Islam, is obligatory for every Muslim provided he or she is in full possession of his or her faculties. There are, however, exemptions for temporary causes, such as during menstruation or child-birth bleeding, and for persons in sick-bed or on a journey. The exemptions clearly signify that Allah never wants His *bandas* to suffer and undergo self-torture. The Holy Quran clearly says: "Allah does not want to put you to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete prescribed period and to glorify him in that he has guided you: and perchance ye shall be grateful" [2:185].

Al-siam is indeed an ancient form of worship, prescribed for the Muslims as well as other nations which preceded us, ever since the time of Hazrat Adam (peace be upon him). According to the commentaries of Al-Manar: "Fasting is an ancient form of worship recognised by previous religions -- even heathen ones. It constituted an essential part of every religion. It was known to the ancient Egyptians, from whom it passed on to the ancient Greeks who used to enforce it principally upon their women. The Romans also observed fast and the Pagans in India and elsewhere practice fasting to this day."

Fasting in different forms was also in vogue among the Hindus and the Buddhists, the Christians and the Jews. According to Al-Manar: "The best-known and oldest of Christian fasts is that of Lent, which precedes Easter. It is the same fasting period as observed by Moses and by Jesus (peace be upon them) and his apostles."

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

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SYED ASHRAF ALI

ROZA (in Persian) or *al-siam* (in Arabic) must not be equated with normal fasting. There is a gulf of difference between *roza* in Islam and mere abstention from food and drinks. *Al-siam* is something sublime, noble, exalted and majestic. "It is an armour," declares the holy Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him), "with which one protects oneself (Bukhari)." It calls for full exercise of self-restraint on all the senses and limbs -- a total and absolute control over all evil acts and desires.

The holy Prophet (pbuh) ordains: "So let not him (who fasts) utter immodest (or foul) speech, nor let him act in an ignorant manner; and if a man quarrels with him or abuses him, he should say

twice, 'I am fasting' (Bukhari)." Abu Huraira (RA) testifies that the holy Prophet (pbuh) said: "He who does not give up uttering falsehood and acting according to it, Allah has no need of his giving up of his food and his drink (Bukhari)."

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The holy month of Ramadhan occupies a unique place in the Islamic calendar. It is the only month which has been explicitly described and analysed in the Holy Quran. The very fact that the Revelation of the Holy Quran commenced in the month of Ramadhan, which is the ninth month of the Arabic year, testifies so eloquently to the sanctity, serenity and divine excellence of this holy month.

The Holy Quran authenticates: "Ramadhan is the (month) in which was sent down the Quran, as a guide to mankind; also clear (signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong)" [2: 185]. What is more, it was in this sacred month that Hazrat Ibrahim (peace be upon him) was blessed with the divine *sahifa*. It was in this month of majesty that the holy Taurat reached mankind through Hazrat Musa (peace be upon him). It was again in this holy month that the sacred Zabur saw the light of day through Hazrat Daud (peace be upon him). Last but not the least, Hazrat Isa (peace be upon him) had the privilege and honour of receiving divine Injil on the 12th of this auspicious month.

A good number of *hadiths* also testify to the divine excellence and eminence

of this sacred month. Abu Huraira (RA) reported God's Messenger (pbuh) as saying: "When Ramadhan begins the gates of paradise are opened, the gates of *jahannam* are locked, and the devils are chained (Bukhari and Muslim)."

Sal'man al-Farisi (RA) told of God's Messenger (pbuh) saying in a sermon which he delivered to them on the last day of Sha'ban: "A great month, a blessed month, a month containing a night which is better than a thousand months has approached you people. God has appointed the observance of fasting during it as an obligatory duty, and the passing of its night in prayer as a voluntary practice. It is a month whose beginning is mercy, whose middle is forgiveness, and whose end is freedom from hell (*Baihaqi in Shu'ab al-Iman*)."

Ramadhan is derived from the word "*ramz*" which means "to burn," "to scorch." The root meaning of Ramadhan is "excessiveness of heat;" the month was so called "when they named them according to the seasons in which they fell, this month agreed with the days of excessive heat," or because the month is supposed to burn away the sins of men (Ghiyansu'l-Lughah, in loco). Some say that it is one of the names of Allah, but there is no authentic

Private coaching as a business

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HUSAIN IMAM

PRIVATE coaching is not a new phenomenon. It has been in practice for ages, though in different forms and under different circumstances. Those of our ancestors who came from villages and from poor financial background used to pursue their studies while staying in the houses of well to do families living in far flung areas.

They didn't have to pay for their food and lodging, which used to be free in exchange for teaching the wards of those families. They used to be called lodging masters. In those days, there were not too many schools in the villages. Boys interested in education had to move out from their own village and take lodging in a village which was nearer to a school.

In the cities, the system was somewhat different. People did not like keeping lodging masters for a variety of reasons. If needed, they used to hire tutors who would visit their houses twice or thrice a week for a fixed period of time and teach their wards for a salary. They were called house tutors. I said "if needed" because it was not very common in those days to engage a house tutor.

Even in the early '60s (I passed my matriculation examination in 1960) I did not see many students seeking or needing private coaching. Only a few who found themselves weak in one or two subjects used to take private coaching from their school teachers, and that also during the gap period between the

test examination and the actual matriculation (now SSC) examination.

What they were taught in the schools was considered good enough to do well in the public examinations and go to the next tier of their educational career. Private coaching at the college stage, let alone at university level, was never heard of. At least I did not know any of my college friends taking private coaching. For a student of university to engage private tutors was unthinkable.

It was also not common to take systematic private coaching, as has to be invariably pursued these days, for admission to any level -- be it school, college or university. In those days, except for Buet, there was probably no system of written admission test for admission into the universities or colleges. A student seeking admission into a good university or college needed, at best, a good second division. If he had a first division, he was admitted with what one may call "*jama'i adar*" (when pampered as though a son-in-law).

Those days are gone with the wind. They are, to the present generation, simply fairy tales. Vigorous and rigorous private coaching has now become the order of the day. It has now turned out to be part and parcel of our education system. You cannot think of admission in any level-- from primary to the highest seat of learning -- without going through private coaching in the coaching centres.

Private coaching has now turned out to be a lucrative business, where investment is nominal but return is phenomenal. It has sprung out like mushrooms all

over the country. No one should be surprised if sooner or later private coaching centres, strewn with attractive sign boards and lucrative packages, urge upon the government to recognise them as an industry and provide them with all the concessions or benefits of a prospective industry, never mind the damaging effects that our educationists and social thinkers continue to argue about.

There was a time when private coaching remained confined to some coaching centres run by some students or retired teachers to cater for the need of the students seeking admission into the public universities, medical colleges and Buet. Sadly, it has now found its place in every tier of education, even in the schools.

The teachers, especially those teaching in the schools renowned for their good results, have almost openly opened coaching centres either in their own houses or in rented premises, forcing students to take private coaching on payment of handsome fees. As if that were not enough, they have now started taking coaching classes in the schools, skipping normal classes, and charging additional fees.

Recently, a television channel ran a live coverage on one or two such schools engaged in such illegal activities in Dhaka. One of those prohibited some students from appearing at the term examination of the school because they did not pay the coaching fees.

That there is complete anarchy in the entire education sector is too mild a statement to make. Many people in the sector -- from the peon to the head of the institution -- seem to be in search of making money. Many teachers have neither time nor urge to take classes in the schools with as much care and attention as is expected from them. They don't even have time to produce a fairly correct question paper for the term examination of their schools. If you don't believe me, let me cite an example



Private tuition or commercialisation?

here. The following are excerpts from a question paper on English second paper for class eight set by one of the top-ranking schools of Dhaka for its mid-term examination held recently. The excerpts are reproduced exactly as they appeared in the question paper. The mistakes are shown in bold print.

Q.3 Change me following sentences into active or passive form.

d) Panic seized me writer

e) I saw him going forwards, me house.

Q.4 Translate me following sentences.

a) Nobody believes him. (Interrogative)

Q.5 Fill in the blanks with me following preposition. Use me clues:

Off, along, against, above, across, down.

a) They were **thing**-----me clouds.

c) The stone **yelled**-----me hill.

d) He walked-----me field.

e) I looked-----me shelves for me book I needed.

Q.7 Re-write me sentences.

b) If fancy I (turn) a trestle pale

d) Would you mind (open) me door?

Q.11 Change me form of speech.

a) What is your name? He said to me.

b) Mr. Seum said do us Thank you.

I have quoted above only a part of the whole question paper. I counted 30 mistakes and then stopped counting out of disgust. How a question paper

with so many mistakes could be printed and produced at the examination hall is a miracle in itself. It is for sure that the teacher who was responsible for setting the question paper did not bother to go through the proof copy before final printing.

The government is spending a lot of tax-payers' money in the education sector. Unless the rot that has started at the root is stemmed, this spending will be like pouring water into a bottomless jar. It is high time our policy-makers woke up to all this.

Capt. Husain Imam is a retired Merchant Navy officer.