

Fasting in Islam

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FASTING during the sacred month of Ramadhan is obligatory for every Muslim provided he or she is adult and in full possession of his or her faculties. It is considered to be one of the five pillars of Islam.

The Ramadhan 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.

1): When the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) came to Madinah, he used to fast three days every month in addition to the Day of Ashoura. As things were, Muslims were not required, when they first arrived in Madinah, to fast more than three days every month. 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 on 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."

2): The second stage begins when Allah, in His infinite Mercy, prescribed the Fast of Ramadhan in the second year of the Hegira. When the Ramadhan Fast was prescribed through the revelation of verses 183 to 187 of Sura Al-Baqara (Chapter II), the fast on other days was abolished. The holy Prophet (pbuh) said: "The Fast of Ramadhan has abolished every other fast." But Hazrat Ayesha Siddiqi (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."

3): 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

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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." (2: 187)

Fasting is an ancient form of worship recognised by all previous religions, even the heathen ones. But Islam introduced a new vision, a new idea, a new spirit into the institution of fasting. For the first time in history, fasting was blessed with a systematic regulation, a scientific method, a noble justification. In the days before the Holy Prophet of Islam (pbuh) Fasting meant the suffering of some privation in the hours of mourning and sorrow. Islam introduced a revolutionary innovation and al-Siyam stood not for mere suffering or abstinence but for an institution for the moral uplift and spiritual elevation of the human soul.

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meant for self-torture. Restraint from the animal instincts for food, drink and sex enables the attention of a man or a woman to be directed to higher and nobler aspects. Fasting in the light of Islam helps us to overcome lust and thereby sets us at the mouth of the road leading to perfection -- perfection to be achieved through prayers and penance, Taqwa and Tarawwih, contemplation and acts of charity, total restraint and abstinence from all evil acts and thoughts.

The self-restraint or *Taqwa*, indeed, has to be a voluntary effort comprising the elements of caution, alertness and fear of Allah. Benign Providence Himself loves this glorious and voluntary attempt at self-restraint by his *banda*. In the words of the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh): "By He, in Whose Hands Muhammad's soul rests, Allah prefers the stench of the mouth of he who fasts to the fragrance of musk."

Al-Siyam, or the fasting during the holy month of Ramadhan, one of the five pillars or Arkans of Islam, is indeed a boon, a divine privilege, a glorious opportunity unparalleled by any other act of piety or worship.

Abu Huraira (RA) reported Allah's Messenger (pbuh) as saying: "When Ramadhan begins the gates of heaven are opened, the gates of Jahannam are locked and the devils are chained." (Bukhari and Muslim). Sahl b. Sa'd (RA) reported Rasul Allah (pbuh) as saying: "In paradise there are eight gates among which is a gate called ar-Rayyan which only those who fast will enter." (Bukhari and Muslim).

Abu Huraira (RA) reported Nabi Kareem (pbuh) as saying: "He who fasts during Ramadhan with faith and seeks his reward from Allah will have his past sins forgiven, he who prays during the night in Ramadhan with faith and seeks his reward will have his past sins forgiven; and he who passes Lailat al-Qadr in prayer with faith and seeks his reward from Allah will have his past sins forgiven." (Bukhari and Muslim).

Anas b. Malik (RA) told of God's Messenger (pbuh) saying when Ramadhan began: "The month has come to you, and it contains a night which is better than a thousand months. He who is deprived of it is deprived of all good, but only those who are denied prosperity are deprived of it." (Ibn Maja transmitted it).

The Holy Prophet of Islam (pbuh) also said: "The one who fasts has two occasions of joy, one when he breaks his fast and one when he meets his Lord." (Bukhari and Muslim).

Salman al-Farsi (RA) told of Allah's Messenger (pbuh): "If someone draws near to God during it with some good act he will be like one who fulfills an obligatory duty in it will be like one who fulfill seventy obligatory duties in another month. It is the month of endurance, and the reward of endurance is paradise." (Baihaqi transmitted it).

The holy month of Ramadhan has come once again to teach us that the temporary renunciation of food and drinks, sex and greed makes the fulfillment of the dark desires even more pleasant. Let us celebrate it in a befitting way, not through lavish Iftar parties and expensive dresses (for the ensuing Eid), not through extravagance and prodigality, but through Taqwa and Tarawwih, Zakat and Fitra, self-restraint and benevolence, prayers and penance. No sensible Muslim can afford to miss this blissful opportunity to learn self-restraint, to temper himself in the kiln of Taqwa, and receive thereby Divine Mercy from the Creator. No one must forget even for a moment the Hadith Qudsi (utterances attributed to Allah outside the Holy Quran) communicated to us by the Holy Prophet (pbuh) when he says: "Every 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: "Fasting belongs to Me and I repay."

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Where are the basic health services?

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I have been visiting some upazilla and union health care centres during last two months and was touched by the simple needs that are not met.

I went to a community clinic at 9:45 am. It was locked, but no one was surprised. For them it was not even the time to start. "He will come soon," said the people around the centre. The land donor came from this house and said: "If you want I can call him by mobile phone." We said: "No it is alright. We just want to know how you get the services." They were relieved. "Oh yes, we get many services. There are lots of medicines here. Even the pregnant women come here for check up." We said: "But there are no female health providers," "No, no, he can do everything. He at least checks their weight, blood pressure etc." they said.

It is hard to judge from these statements about the quality of service. But the people were protective of the community clinic. They said: "How can one provide services in such a situation? You see the building is made in such a way that one cannot even stand outside if it rains. There is no shade. The latrine and tubewell are out of order, but no money to repair them. Can you believe, the government has money for construction of the building, but there is not even a broom to sweep the rooms? It is always dirty. The person who comes here from the morning does not have any allocation for refreshments. How can he work for so long without having anything to eat?"

We went to a Union Health and Family Welfare Centre (UHFWC). The signboard is small, but there is a big message written on the building: Atharor age biye noy, bisher age sontan noy (no marriage before 18, no children before 20). The building is nice with some empty residential facilities. We went there right after 2 pm. It was closed. Only cows and goats were seen in the premise. Another union health centre, called Family Welfare Centre (FWC), is now in appalling condition. A corner of the ceiling is full of holes and may break anytime. The operation theatre and the labour room were closed.

At one UHFWC, we found patients as well as the service providers. It was very good to see few women waiting for services and others talking with the sub-assistant medical officer. There was no electricity. She said: "The electricity comes and goes quite frequently, so I have kept the switch on so that I know when the

electricity comes." She seemed confident, and had a good rapport with the women who came for services. In response to our question on services she said: "We have to be tactical. This is actually a family planning centre, but patients come for different health problems, we cannot let them go back empty handed. So we give them at least some tablets." As she said: "Keel



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o firan lage, chikitsha o deya lage" (we have to avoid the kicks from the unsatisfied users as well as give treatment). The high officials only want the target of contraceptive distribution to be fulfilled. At least for simple health problems they can give some medicine. They must respond to the people's problem.

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is perhaps one of the reasons why the union health centres are not open for longer time. They are supposed to open at 8 am and close at 2 pm. But they don't open till 10 am and close by 1 pm. Sometimes they remain open for only an hour. People call Them: "Ek ghontar haspatal" (one-hour hospital). I must say, those who are running the UHFWC are trying hard to

upazilla headquarters. At one UHC, the approach is impressive. It is a well-established facility with two-storey concrete building with enough space inside and outside. There is an ambulance, but it is not used. Why? The answer is: "No allocation for fuel." We have been to some UHCs during office hours. There were many patients for the OPD and in front of the dispensary. In some UHCs, we went after 2 pm, where the OPD service was not open but the emergency section was open with a doctor present.

In the indoor facilities we saw children with cough, cold and fever, patients with burn injuries etc. The nurses are there, however the attendants take care of their respective patients. That's why, in the female ward there were men around the female patients' bed, and in the male ward there were women around the male patients' beds. This was causing uneasiness among female patients. Anyway, the cleanliness of the hospital is a big issue.

To improve the quality of the health services some basic allocations are needed. Undoubtedly, people prefer to go to the government hospitals but get disappointed because of simple problems.

The budget (2012-2013) for health is Tk.9355 crore, giving priority to maternal, neonatal, child and adolescent health; community health care initiative; family planning field service delivery, and national nutrition service. This is only 4.7% of the total budget allocation, one of the lowest allocations in the budget in the last decade. Despite demands from health groups for an increase in the budget, nothing has happened. The low budget will not be able to cover the required costs for providing basic services.

If we go through the Health and Family Welfare section of the budget speech (Section 114 to 122), it talks about setting up community clinics (which is not enough to ensure service delivery to the people), building up stocks of contraceptives (but no plan to strengthen the service delivery of family planning to make it safe for women), manpower and infrastructure development (recruitments are there but no efforts to make them stay in the rural areas where they are most needed), and ICT services for health (not clear who will actually do it).

I feel we need a budget to provide basic services. Unfortunately, the budget allocation fails to see the simple need.

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