# Ramadan in the 21st Century

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It was late in the evening as I drove past the Regents Park Mosque. The usually empty road was lined with rows of cars on either side and there was a steady flow of pedestrians walking towards the mosque. After a while it became quite hard to drive and I found myself slowing down to a snail's pace and had people zig zagging across the street in front of me all heading in the same direction. It took me a moment to realise why there was such a buzz of activity at such a late hour. It was of course time for 'Taraweeh' prayers and the crowds were all trying to make sure they got to the mosque on time. It was a rather wonderful sight watching everyone from all races and ethnicities walking side by side. There were men in shirts and trousers, *kurta pyjamas* and 'thobes' (ankle length flowing white robes worn in the Middle East) making their way for the prayers. It was a sign that Ramadan was well and truly here in London.

Come to think of it there weren't very many mosques around when I was growing up. According to a 2011 census, there are about 1500 registered mosques in the UK, compared to only 30 in 1971. Even the number of Muslims living in here has increased substantially from 226 thousand to 2.7 million in the last few decades.

All I have to do is think back to my childhood to realise just how much things have changed in the UK. Ramadan in London was a different thing altogether when I was growing up. Life went on as usual around us and it was only at home that we would experience the arrival of the holy month. Most of my friends had no idea what Ramadan was and even the grownups were unaware of the thirty day fasting period observed by their Muslim colleagues, friends and neighbours.

Iftar was usually a quiet affair with none of the food items we are used to in Bangladesh. At the time, it was extremely difficult to buy lentils for our typical 'daaler bora' (bite size snacks made with lentils and onions) unless you went to a specialist or deshi shop. However, these types of stores were exceedingly rare and even if you happen to stumble upon one the likelihood of finding products such as puffed rice (moori) would be pretty slim. In fact, I remember my mother preparing soup or a delicious Persian style broth called 'aabgosht' to break her fast with, before having dinner.

Ramadan is becoming a far less isolating experience for those of us living in London. I can now pop down to my local supermarket and find a whole shelf dedicated to different types of lentils which gives me the ability to make as many 'daaler bora' as I feel like as often as I want.

Even when I was married and living in Germany, Ramadan was a somewhat lonely experience, more so than London. I think I must have been the only person of South Asian origin living in the little town of Kronberg and most likely one of two Muslims residing in the area. My husband being the other one. As it was just the two of us fasting, 'sehri' was a bowl of cornflakes and our iftar consisted of tuna sandwiches and a cup of tea. After a day of fasting it really wasn't the most appetising meal. However, it was easy to prepare and a damn sight easier to get hold of than 'cholaboot (black chickpeas) and moori'!

Although the days are getting longer and the almost nineteen hours of fasting is becoming harder and harder, Ramadan is becoming a far less isolating experience for those of us living in London. I can now pop down to my local supermarket and find a whole shelf dedicated to different types of lentils which gives me the ability to make as