## The auspicious month of Ramadhan

SYED ASHRAF ALI

HE holy Ramadhan, the ninth month in the Islamic calendar, occupies a unique place in the annals of history. It was in this glorious month that Hazrat Ibrahim (AS) was blessed with the divine Sahifa. It was in this month of divine majesty that the Holy Taurat reached mankind through Hazrat Musa (AS). It was again in this month of sublime excellence that the sacred Zabur saw the light of day through Hazrat Daud (AS). Hazrat Isa (AS) had the privilege and honour of receiving the divine revelation of the Holy Injil in this auspicious month of Ramadhan. And last but not the least, it was in this month, whose excellence was much extolled by no less a person than the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself, that the Revelation of the Holy Quran commenced on the sacred night of Lailat-ul-Qadr. Sura Baqara testifies to the sanctity and excellence of this sacred month when it declares: "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). 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 because "when they changed the names of the months from the ancient language they

Roza is a Persian word. Its equivalent in Arabic is al-Siyam. Although 'fasting' and Roza are synonymous, Roza or al-Siyam must not be equated with normal fasting. There is a gulf of difference between Roza in Ramadhan and mere abstention from food and drinks. Al-Siyam is something much sublime, much nobler, more exalted and majestic. "It is an armour," declares the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), "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 on all evil acts and desires, control of not only 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 (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

named them according to the seasons in

which they fell, and this month agreed

with the days of excessive heat."

need of his giving up of his food and his drinks" (Bukhari).

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-Siyam or Roza during the holy month of Ramadhan, one of the five pillars 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 menstruation or child-birth 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 and to glorify Him in that He has guided you: and perchance ye shall be grateful" (2:185).

Al-Siyam or the fasting is indeed an

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 thy 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 (pbuh) himself fasted for forty days to qualify himself to receive the Divine Revelation. Jesus (pbuh) also fasted for forty days in the desert and commanded his disciples to do the same.

Islam introduced a new meaning, a new vision, a new idea, a new spirit into the institution of Fasting. Fasting was blessed with a systematic regulation, a scientific method, a noble justification. In the days before the holy Prophet (pbuh) Fasting meant the suffering of some privation in the hours of mourn-

Benign Providence himself loves this glorious and voluntary effort and 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 bad breath of one who fasts to the fragrance of musk" (Bukhari and Muslim). Al-Siyam 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 Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Allah, in His infinite Mercy, declares: "A man's work belongs to him. A good deed is repaid from tenfold to seven hundred times. Fasting belongs to Me and I repay" (Bukhari and Muslim).

Salman al-Farisi (RA) told of Allah'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 nights 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. If someone draws near to God during it with some good act he will be like one who fulfils an obligatory duty in another month, and he who fulfils an obligatory duty in it will be like one who fulfils seventy obligatory duties in another month. It is the month of endurance, and the reward of endurance is paradise. It is the month of sharing with others, and a month in which the believer's provision is increased. If someone gives one who has been fasting something with which to break his fast it will provide forgiveness of his sins and save him from hell, and he will have a reward equal to his without his reward being diminished in any respect.

......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 has come back once again with all its pristine glory and spiritual excellence to teach us self-restraint, to temper us in the kiln of Tagwa, to provide us with a unique opportunity to receive Divine Mercy directly from Allah. Let us rise to the occasion and celebrate it in all sobriety in a befitting way, not through extravagance and prodigality, not through sumptuous iftar parties and delicious sehri dishes, but through prayers and penance, self-restraint and meditation, acts of charity and benevolence.

The writer is a former Director General, Islamic



ancient form of worship, prescribed for the Muslims as well as other nations which preceded us, ever since the time of Hazrat Adam (AS). 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 practise 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 Jesus (peace be upon them) and his apostles."

ing and sorrow. Islam introduced a revolutionary innovation -- Siyam stood not for mere suffering or abstinence but an institution for the moral uplift and spiritual elevation of the human soul. A Muslim Fast is undoubtedly stricter than other systems of Fasting, but it provides alleviations for special circumstances. The restraint from the animal instincts for food, drink and sex enables the attention of a man or a woman to be directed to higher or nobler aspects. Fasting in the light of Islam helps him or her to overcome lusts 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 selfrestraint or Tagwa indeed has to be a voluntary effort comprising the elements of caution, alertness and fear of Allah.

Foundation Bangladesh.

## Swaraj's visit will hopefully revitalise India-Bangladesh relations

SYED MUNIR KHASRU

HE recent visit by external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj to Bangladesh is an important gambit for India-Bangladesh relations. The strong mandate received by the BJP in the polls gives it a rare opportunity to resolve long-outstanding bilateral issues. Unfortunately, on the Indian electoral circuit, Bangladesh did not have much significance. In the BJP's 50-page election manifesto, Bangladesh was mentioned

only once, and that too to say that if elected, the BJP will "complete all pending fencing work along the India-Bangladesh border, stepping up border security." The Congress manifesto had outlined specific policy stances with regard to all neighbours except Bangladesh. Bangladesh and India have a shared border. Border

killing by the Indian forces continues and demarcation and enclave issues have not been settled yet. According to the 2010 Human Rights Watch report, around 1,000 Bangladeshis were killed in a decade by the Indian border guards. The Indian government in a court submission in 2012 maintained that it had deported more than 45,066 Bangladeshi 'illegal migrants' during the period 1991-2012. On the other hand, Silicon India, an Indian magazine, reported in May 2013 that about

ACROSS

28 Mineo of movies

29 Laughs heartily

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43 "Get lost!"

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31 Gold, to Coronado

500,000 Indians from West Bengal, Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura, and Mizoram illegally work in Bangladesh, remitting a considerable amount to India. The border is porous both ways and economic migration is not something only poor Bangladeshis do. White-collar Indians work in Bangladesh and the money they remit would also not be small amounts. It would be useful to collaboratively address the root causes of illegal migration since there is hardly any reliable data on such immigration.

Water is a contentious issue and the BJP manifesto vows to implement the "inter-linking of rivers based on feasibility." The implications could be devastating for Bangladesh as it would dry up the Padma -- one of the three main rivers of Bangladesh. Upper riparian India's withdrawal of the Teesta waters is having a dire impact on the environment while driving up the costs more than 10 times for Bangladeshi farmers. The Congress lacked the political boldness to sign the Teesta treaty, but the BJP has the mandate to take the necessary steps, unencumbered by the need to appease mercurial political allies.

India-Bangladesh relations in the past five years give a lopsided picture. While Bangladesh has helped to eliminate insurgency in the North-East, India has not always acted reciprocally. Even with duty removal for all Bangladeshi exports, except 25 goods, India enjoyed a trade surplus of \$4.5 billion in 2012-13. The previous Indian government was widely perceived as meddling in the recent elections in Bangladesh. A non-partisan India friendly to all Bangladeshis and not any particular party or ideology is important for sustainable ties.

Swaraj is well poised to have a perspective characterised by mutual benefits as opposed to narrowly defined self-interest. When former PM Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka in August 2011 brought mixed results, Swaraj, then opposition leader, showed her vision of India-Bangladesh relations by saying that border killings should be brought down to zero for good neighbourly relations. Hence, it is fair to expect that the minister's visit would result in setting a tone that is positive and taking an approach that is longterm and result-oriented. In the regional context, it is time India took up the Saarc agenda and linked it with its overall 'Look East' policy. India might situate Saarc integration together with the evolving BCIM and India-Asean ties. Be it bilateral or regional, South Asia needs to the rise to the occasion as does its biggest player, India.

The writer is Professor, Institute of Business Administration (IBA), (The article was first published in the June 26, 2014 edition of the Hindustan Times, India.)

## Is it written in the stars?



CCORDING to the Gospel of Mathew the wise men, or Magi, from the east came to Jerusalem trailing a bright star, which they interpreted as an omen that a King was born. The astral light guided them to Bethlehem where the Magi reportedly discovered the infant Jesus. The mystery surrounding this legend has gripped the atten-

tion of astronomers for many centuries. Research in astrophysics suggests that the celestial light around the time of the birth of Jesus Christ could probably be an unusual alignment of the planets, the sun and the moon. It is likely that the wise men were Zoroastrian astrologers who interpreted this planetary alignment as a sign that a powerful leader was born.

Apart from its religious significance, the biblical story illustrates that historically astronomy and astrology were intertwined. By simple definition astronomy is the observation and study of celestial bodies, while astrology attempts to predict how the planets' positions influence key events and the lives of human beings. Until the later part of the medieval period astronomy was treated as the foundation upon which astrology could operate. However, the 18th century marked the separation of astronomy and astrology as two distinct disciplines. Astronomy is now studied as a pure science. Astrology, which uses the apparent locations of heavenly objects as the basis for the prediction of future events, has been relegated as a pseudoscience, having no scientific validity.

My interest in the intricate link between astronomy and astrology was kindled by an ongoing discussion by members of an Internet group that I am a part of. The diverse group comprises knowledgeable physicists, an erudite professor of political science and several well-informed and learned individuals who have offered valid insights on: whether or not astrology has any scientific basis and astronomy can be used to justify the astrological predictions of zodiac signs.

The intent of this column is not to support or contradict these viewpoints. However, as a student of physics (who has failed to make any significant contribution to her area of discipline) I would like to inject a somewhat different perspective to the discussion.

There is no question that astronomy is a science that helps us conceptualise and calculate the shape, size, nature and paths of celestial bodies with accuracy and precision. But the problem is that modern day astronomers tend to confine the study of the subject mostly to mathematical equations and theoretical calculations. Interestingly, early scientists/astronomers like Nicolaus Copernicus (who made the astronomical discovery that the earth revolves around the sun) and Galileo Galilei (who used a home-made telescope to show that the earth was not the centre of the solar system as was commonly believed then) did not just sit in an office room and focus on diagrams and mathematics. They were inspirational thinkers with great imagination, and a can-do attitude. They actually started off by "stargazing" and were connected to nature and its mysterious phenomena -- some of which still remain a deep mystery. Despite the fact that Copernicus revisited and revised the works of Aristotle and Ptolemy he had great regard for these ancient philosophers/scientists whose theories and discoveries were based on abstract concepts developed from observing natural occurrences rather than hardcore scientific evidence.

I realise that today we live in a world of specialisation where knowledge has become compartmentalised. But I wonder if we are missing out on something important as a result of the narrow outlook that bars us from moving from one discipline to another and accepting that there may be some advantage to viewing each discipline as a small part of the whole. The fact remains that everything in our universe is essentially interconnected.

Whether or not we accept that Christ's birth was signaled by the appearance of a bright star in the heavens is a matter of choice. But let us not underestimate the benefits of simply looking up at the vastness of a starlit sky and accepting that there are things out there that we know very little of. The expanse of the sky also provides us with a realistic perspective of our existence and our limited role in the order of things.

Whatever branch of science we pursue the ultimate goal is to use our knowledge to improve the lives of human beings. This objective is better served if we are more aligned to each other and also to nature in the real sense, not just through numbers and figures! Yes, calculations and computations can help us explain many of the mysteries of life and space. But, to discover new horizons we need to let our minds flow freely, so that we can imagine the unimaginable!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank. E-mail: shiftingimages@gmail.com

### **CROSSWORD** by Thomas Joseph



O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint.

[al-Baqarah, 2:183]

1 Sch. support group Business goal 2 "Vive le --!" 7 Minorfight 3 Bullring call 11 Ohio city 13 Danny of "Moon-struck" 14 Weaver's need 15 Excuse from punishment 20 Counts calories 23 Gl-entertaining org. 24 Fragrant flower 26 Dijon denial 27 Granola bit

5 Not active 6 Horn sound 8 College VIP 10 Newsman Brokaw 16 "Golden Boy" play-wright 17 Ladder parts 18 "The truth -- there" 19 Priest, at times 21 Small crown 22 Stylist's place 24 Like hair mousse 25 Unrefined 30 Depth unit 33 Kicked in 35 Like the Ger. "der"

36 Obsessed with

37 Compass pt.

38 Cry of insight

41 Floral garland

42 Curator's topic

40 North Pole worker

ATHOS EDGES ARMOR CAMEO STORY READS

CRYPTOQUOTE VKI MYHZHCDG OYHVIY HP CMV KI OKM YIRYDHCP RYMT HTHVDVHCZ MVKIYP, FQVKIOKMUDCFIHTHVDVINFXCMCI.

-- RYDCUMHP - YICI NI UKDVIDQFYHDCN

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: LOVE IS THE SUBSTANCE OF ALL LIFE. EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED IN LOVE, ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING. -- JULIA CAMERON

### Yesterday's answer

IMMYFALLON DAZES TANALP JIMMYKIMMEL

A XYDLBAAXR is

LONGFELLOW One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two 0's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each

day the code letters are

different.

#### **BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker WHAT'S WRONG, GREG+ MORT WALKER MY BREAKFAST DEAR? ISMADATME! 10-11

#### **HENRY**

# by Don Tranchte

