

UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS SCRIPTURES and finding spirituality



ILLUSTRATION: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

In Muslim households, children are taught to read the Quran from start to finish, sometimes more than once. But that's the thing, they are taught to read, not understand it.

SABIL SADAT ZAHIR

Faith has always been an important source of hope in my life. I might not be the most religious person, but my beliefs have always helped me get through both good and bad times. Last Ramadan, I had decided to properly start studying the Holy Quran and understand its meaning, to not only get a better understanding of my faith but also to strengthen it.

While reading the Quran, I realised how subjective a lot of the teachings are and how I really needed to take some time to truly analyse the meaning and find the answers I am looking for. The language of the Quran seems clear yet so deep at the same time, and that learning process gave me a profound sense of spirituality.

In Muslim households, children are taught to read the Quran from start to finish, sometimes more than once. But that's the thing, they are taught to read, not understand it. While it is true that there is an immense reward in reading the Quran in Arabic, understanding the message is arguably more important.

Maybe the phrasing and structure of the Book would be a bit difficult for children to grasp at first, but I believe that is where Arabic teachers can help out. It can be perceived the same way children are taught Mathematics or English. Obviously, learning to read

and write is important, but when teachers explain the concepts to the students so that they can apply them, that's when the learning becomes actually effective.

This idea applies to people of all faiths. Most of us have inherited the religion of our parents and their parents. As a result, a focus is put on the hand-picked inherited teachings rather than the deeper and broader concepts of the faith that would help us to strengthen our spiritual connections.

"As a Bengali Hindu, I find reading and understanding our scriptures to be of immense importance in fostering a deeper spiritual connection to my faith. I feel that context is very important when it comes to religious scriptures. Oftentimes, certain aspects of the scriptures are cherry-picked and fed to us from a very young age, which leads to a very shallow understanding of what you're believing in. Reading and understanding the scriptures has provided me with the context behind the teachings, which has provided me with an overall better understanding of my faith," said Prasun Bipra, 20.

Ribeng Talukder, 23, shared similar perspectives, "In Buddhism, reading scripture is mandatory for monks as well as regular people. It describes the moral values a person should have for the benefit of others as well as

himself.

Tripiṭaka texts are considered the holy book of Buddhism which means 'three books' and defines three parts of it. We do everything within the scriptural description. In Buddhism, meditation is one of the ways to activate your inner peace and perform for everyone for the benefit of humankind. Among the teachings, wisdom, compassion for all beings, and karma are particularly noteworthy. Therefore, I think Tripiṭaka has mentioned all the ways to be a spiritually and physically complete human being."

Understanding religious books also help people to regain their lost faith. Peter Haldar*, 23, shared how reading the Bible helped him return to his faith after a period of struggling with his belief, "There was a time when I didn't like religion that much. But then I went through some really tough times and it felt like nothing was going right in my life. At that time, I started to pray and I asked God to help me out, and slowly my life started to get better. That's when

I came back to my faith, because I understood that everything happens because God wants it and God helps us in every single way. Then I started to learn more about my religion, like the stories of Jesus Christ and all the prophets who came before him, and I learned a lot of things. The concepts are very deep and we need to understand the message ourselves rather than taking everything literally. When I was at my all-time low, I always found answers in the Bible."

Religion is meant to be a guide for people to go through their lives. When we face moments of doubt or struggles, finding words in the scriptures which we can resonate with gives us the little spark of hope we need to move forward. "More than religious texts, my personal experience was the main reason

that I came back to my religion. I felt like God wanted me to come back to Him, and after reading the religious texts, I learned for sure that

God put me through those tough tests so that I would find my way back to my faith, and He gave me the strength to fight those tough times. That single thought was enough for me to solidify my faith," added Peter.

My own spiritual journey of reading the Quran and praying has led me to a better understanding of my life. I found the answers and messages I needed to hear, I found reasons to have strength and learned how forgiving God can be. In the end, my own experience alongside the accounts of people from other faiths has made it clear how powerful these texts can be when it comes to guiding us into a better tomorrow.

*The name has been changed upon request

Maintaining a sense of freedom in a controlling household

NADERA NAEEMA OHI

For most young adults, freedom isn't something they have to think about often. Going out with friends, choosing a job, how to spend their time, what to wear, or speaking their minds are just parts of life, not rights to be punished for wanting.

For some, the control their households exercise over them becomes a tool for abuse. Thus, trying to find freedom in one's life ends up becoming a lifelong journey.

Nawar E Jannat, a young professional, shares, "I face restrictions from my parents when it comes to clothing and travelling. I have a dark complexion, so my parents pick out which colour will look good on me. I am also not allowed to wear Western clothes, and when I tried to rebel, they threw away the clothes without telling me about it. I am also not allowed to stay over at friends' houses, and I am 25. It goes without saying, but I am also not allowed to go on tours with my friends."

Nazifa Annanya*, a university student, shares her own struggles, "While I understand their need to protect me, I really wish they'd at least let me travel on my own to places nearby. For example, whenever my friends and I hang out outside of our university campus, we always pick one neighbourhood close enough to everyone's homes, and yet I'm not allowed to go unless either one of my parents are available to drop me off

and then pick me up. I know my way to the place and then back, I even have my own set of keys for our apartment, I have everything I'd need to travel independently, but I'm never allowed to do so, and that infuriates me."

The methods of control used by some households are severe, as Rupaalee Rishi*, a high school student, shares their examples, "I have grown up in a family that is, for the lack of better words, very driven by narcissistic and manipulative tendencies. Using the internet was out of the question. I was not allowed to exercise any form of privacy, such as a lock on my door, and they would go through my diaries and personal belongings. I was accused of being on drugs due to being extremely exhausted after bullying at school, or accused of being romantically

For anyone going through similar experiences in a controlling household, there are some things you can do to try and work towards having a sense of identity or freedom in your home.

involved when I asked for products like conditioner, deodorant, or moisturiser. I was not allowed access to medical care unless the ailments were extremely visible, because my word was never enough. The list goes on. The punishment for breaking any of their rules was physical and mental abuse."

The struggle for personal independence starts so early on that for some, the barriers seem impossible to overcome at a later age. "I hold back from asking for things unless I'm in

dire need of them. However, when I do ask for them, my parents will try to convince me that they'll deal with it later, ignore me, or straight-up say that I don't need it. I feel like being an obedient and easy child has backfired onto me, and has made me marginalised in my own home. I want to be taken seriously, I want to be heard by more than just the four walls of my house, I want to be needed beyond what I am expected to be responsible of. I wish I could change that," says Nazifa.

Finally, for anyone going through similar experiences in a controlling household, there are some things you can do to try and work towards having a sense of identity or freedom in your home. As Rupaalee says, "As long as it's safe for you, stand your ground. Keep demanding. Don't be afraid of being a problem child if what they are restricting are literal necessities – food, toiletries, privacy, communication with peers, medicine, all the other necessities to have a fulfilling life. Most importantly, if you are going through abuse, talk to trusted adults and ask for help. Remember that you are not alone."

If you are struggling with your circumstances, Nawar offers the encouragement she needed herself, "Be resilient. It will be difficult, but I hope you never give up. I made the most beautiful memories of my life by trying a little harder every day."

*Names have been changed upon request for privacy

Nadera Naeema Ohi is an A level student at Maple Leaf International School.



ILLUSTRATION: FATIMA JAHAN ENA