

Ramadan away from home

LIFE AS IT IS

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Leaving home is often an inevitable part of life. A vast number of Bangladeshis leave their homeland every year to pursue work and higher education abroad. While these expatriates miss "home" every day of the year, they miss it even more during Ramadan, when a festive atmosphere permeates the nation. Most Bangladeshis fast from dawn until sunset, gather with friends and family, and make preparations for Eid-ul-Fitr. We spoke to the Bangladeshi diaspora spread across the globe to learn what they miss and how they observe Ramadan away from home.

Haseen Cherry, Oxford, United Kingdom

Haseen Cherry is a senior scientist and head of applications at Bio-Rad Laboratories, Inc. She moved to the UK twenty years ago. She recounted her experience of observing Ramadan in Bangladesh.

"Although the holy month of Ramadan was primarily about fasting, praying, reciting the Holy Quran, and giving Zakat, the true essence of Ramadan transcended these practices," she said.

Cherry recalls that in the early morning, a band of volunteers would walk in their neighbourhood and sing "Sehri-r shomoy holo jaago mumkin/ Rahmat er bhaagi hote jaago mumkin" to rouse people from their deep sleep. The tune of the Islamic song still lingers in her mind even after decades.

She also recalls that exchanging iftar with neighbours was a common practice. "Exchanging iftar with neighbours was a daily practice back in the day. I remember running to the houses of our neighbours with trays full of food and making sure that all of it was distributed before the siren from the mosques went off."

However, Ramadan in her life in the UK is not as joyous as she grew up experiencing. Life abroad is busy and often, solitary.

However, Cherry brings home the joy of sharing a communal iftar by inviting her Muslim friends over to her place on weekends.

Farhan Reza, Shanghai, China

Farhan Reza is a finance professional working at a multilateral development bank headquartered in Shanghai, China. This is Reza and his family's first Ramadan away from home and he says that he misses the iftar and sehri announcements that play from Dhaka's mosques during Ramadan time. Reza also misses the iftar gatherings with his colleagues.

"In Dhaka, my colleagues and I would have iftar gatherings almost every week. This is something I miss here in Shanghai," he said.

Unlike in Bangladesh, where there is a special Ramadan working routine, in non-Muslim majority countries, it is life as usual.

"In Bangladesh, you have reduced working hours during the month of Ramadan. Here, it is business as usual, so it is challenging to have iftar at home on working days, especially at this time of the year when the sun sets early," Reza said.

Fatima Ferdousi, Sydney, Australia

Fatima Ferdousi is an analytics manager at one of the Big Four banks of Australia. During the month of Ramadan, Ferdousi misses Dhaka's iftar delicacies as well as the iftar time ambience.

"I miss having chola, peyaju, and haleem for iftar," she said. "Although I try to make traditional iftar items on weekends, it does not happen on a daily basis."

As Maghrib in Sydney is now at around 7.30, which is past the family's usual dinner time, Fatima and her family break their fast with light appetisers followed by a proper *deshi* dinner.

"For sehri, I just take a cup of milk and a banana," she said.

"My 11-year-old son, however, likes to eat rice for his sehri, and I think if we observed Ramadan in Dhaka, he would have loved eating the steaming rice that his *nanu* would have freshly prepared for him," she added.

Ferdousi shared with us how her workplace accommodates Muslim employees; they have separate prayer rooms for men and women and even special arrangements to perform wudu.

"The prayer rooms at my bank are modelled after the prayer rooms you will see at Malaysian workplaces," Ferdousi, who lived and worked in Malaysia before moving to Australia a decade ago, said.

"My previous workplace here in Australia also had a proper prayer room for its employees," she added. "I think this sort of inclusiveness boosts employee morale and productivity."



mutton biriyani, haleem, or nihari to the iftar spread," she said. "On weekends, we try to go to an Indian, Pakistani, or Arab restaurant to enjoy iftar."

Zahra, her husband, and their three children say the Maghrib prayer together during this month of Ramadan. "My husband leads the prayer and my children love seeing their father in the role of an imam," she said.

Zahra misses the month-long festive atmosphere that envelops the country at this time of the year. She misses fasting as a community and the delicious Ramadan delicacies sold by iftar vendors.

"I also miss Dhaka's Eid shopping scene, when shops and malls across the country are bedecked with string lights, festoons, streamers, hanging swirls, and whatnot, adding extra joy to Eid preparations," she said.

"Here in the US, I also miss Bangladesh's long Eid holidays and I miss visiting my grandparents, uncles, and aunts to exchange Eid greetings," she added.

However, in her new reality thousands of miles away from Bangladesh, Zahra tries to observe Ramadan and celebrate Eid-ul-Fitr in her own way. Surrounded by her three children, she decorates the house with Ramadan and Eid-themed décor to bring holiday vibes to her home in America.

"We also prepare iftar platters for our Muslim friends and neighbours to share the joy of Ramadan. We visit malls with friends to buy Eid clothes and arrange a mehendi night the day before Eid," Zahra said.

The Bangladeshi diaspora misses the tantalising aroma of masala chickpeas, crispy lentil fritters, and warm-moist *jlapi* that wafted across the house at sundown. They miss the melodious voice of the local muezzin and his call to Maghrib prayer, and they miss gathering around the dinner table with their families to break fast with bites of Arabian dates. However, life goes on; they gradually adapt to their new surroundings, observing Ramadan in their own unique ways.

By Wara Karim
Photo: Collected

Safe touch, unsafe touch: Why every child needs to learn this

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

Abuse is not always committed by strangers; in most cases, it comes from someone the child knows and trusts. Without guidance,

Children may not recognise when something is wrong, and even if they do, they may not feel safe enough to speak up. This is why body safety education needs to begin early and be woven naturally into everyday conversations.

Using the right language

One of the biggest mistakes parents make is using euphemisms instead of the correct names for body parts. This can lead to confusion and make it difficult for children to report inappropriate behaviour. Dr Ahmed emphasises the importance of clear and accurate language: "We must first clarify certain fundamental differences in terminology. When talking about body parts, we often find that the correct anatomical names are not always used; instead, alternative or euphemistic names are introduced."

He says, adding, "This, however, should

be avoided. Children must learn the accurate names for their body parts in their own language from an early age, which can help to foster a sense of ownership over their personal space and privacy."

When children can confidently name their body parts, they are less likely to be manipulated or silenced. They should also be taught that their private areas are their own, and no one should touch them unless it's for a valid reason, like a doctor's check-up with a parent's permission.

Teaching boundaries through everyday moments

Conversations about safe and unsafe touch do not have to be formal. Simple reminders during bath time, dressing, or bedtime – like "Your body belongs to you, and you can always say no if something feels wrong" – can reinforce bodily autonomy.

Dr Ahmed highlights the "Underwear Rule", which teaches children that private areas – covered by undergarments – should not be touched by others.

"Establishing clear boundaries from a young age helps children recognise

inappropriate behaviour and seek help when necessary," he explains.

Children should also know that secrets about body safety are never okay. If someone tells them, "Don't tell your parents" — that is a red flag.

Boys are at risk too

A common misconception in our society is that only girls need protection. This belief is dangerous. Boys can also be victims of abuse and because of societal expectations, they may feel even more pressure to stay silent.

Dr Ahmed emphasises, "Another common misconception is that only girls are vulnerable to abuse. Research, conducted globally, shows that one in four girls faces some form of abuse. However, this does not mean that boys are safe from harm. The belief that boys are not at risk is a dangerous misconception that needs to be addressed."

Every child, regardless of gender, needs to learn about body safety. Parents must reassure their sons that if they ever feel uncomfortable or unsafe, they have the

right to speak up.

Creating a safe space for communication
Perhaps, the most important step parents can take is to create an environment where children feel safe to talk. A child who knows they will be listened to is more likely to report something wrong. However, many parents in Bangladesh do not know how to have these conversations.

Dr Ahmed emphasises that awareness programmes should focus not only on children but also on parents, helping them communicate about body safety in a sensitive, age-appropriate way.

Above all, the most effective way to prevent abuse is through education, open communication, and creating safe spaces for children to express themselves. The more we talk, the safer our children will be. As parents, teachers, and caregivers, we must break the silence because an informed child is a protected child.

By Ayman Anika
Photo: Collected