

**LIFE AS IT IS**

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# The emotional reality of observing Ramadan in the western world

It is that time of the year when the Bangladeshi diaspora misses the tantalising aroma of masala chickpeas, mutton haleem, crispy eggplant fritters, and warm jilapi. They profoundly miss sitting around the dining table with family to break their fast, as the melodious voice of the local muezzin recites the Maghrib prayer. They greatly miss the excitement of Eid shopping and the overall festive atmosphere that fills the holy month of Ramadan.

We spoke to some of our non-resident Bangladeshi (NRB) men and women to learn what they miss and how they observe Ramadan away from home.

**Shama Ahmed, Minnesota, USA**

Shama Ahmed, who is a senior accountant at Northrop Grumman Corporation, an American aerospace and defence company, says that Ramadan in the US is not remotely as festive as it is in Dhaka. Fasting is not the issue for her; it is sleep deprivation that afflicts her most during Ramadan, as there is no special office schedule. "It is business as usual here, so I am terribly sleep-deprived during the month of Ramadan," she said.

Asked what she and her family enjoy for iftar, she said, "For iftar, we usually have chhola or chotpoti and lots of fruits. It is only on some days that I cook khichuri, haleem or noodles for iftar."

"We eat fried foods only once in a while during Ramadan," she added.

Ahmed misses Dhaka's iftar bazaars and all the iftar delights that one can find during this time. "Dhaka's iftar bazaars are a feast for the eyes," she said.

She also misses having iftar with her parents and all the special dishes that her late mother used to prepare. "I especially miss her doi bora. My doi bora is never as good as hers," she said.



**Sharif Mohammad Ruhul Quddus, England, United Kingdom**

Dr Sharif Quddus is a speciality doctor at the Department of Neurology and General Internal Medicine at the Royal Cornwall Hospital Trust in England. This Ramadan has been particularly hectic for Dr Quddus and his wife, who had their second child just three months ago.

Asked about the typical workday for a Bangladeshi Muslim doctor in the West, Dr Quddus said, "As a doctor, my day begins before dawn. After sehri, I barely get any time to rest. I leave home at 7 in the morning for a busy clinic day or a long list of referrals."

The hospitals in the UK allow Muslim employees a short recess to break their fast and say their Maghrib prayer during Ramadan, which greatly helps practicing Muslims like Dr Quddus. "On most Ramadan days, I break my fast at work, but eat my iftar after returning home from work," he said.

Like other NRBs, Dr Quddus, too, profoundly misses Bangladesh during this time of the year. What he misses most during Ramadan is his father making dua for the whole family before iftar.

Dr Quddus also misses the sights, sounds, and smells that envelop Dhaka during Ramadan. "Unlike here, lively streets, colourful clothes on display, glittering women's jewellery, hum of shoppers bargaining with shopkeepers, and the aroma of iftar delights make every day of Ramadan a festive occasion in Bangladesh," he said.

**Mahnoor Ali, Shanghai, China**

Mahnoor Ali, who moved to Shanghai,

China less than two years ago because of her husband's employment, is still adapting to her new reality. This is her second Ramadan in Shanghai, and she is a little less homesick than she was a year ago.

Ali worked for a financial institution in Dhaka. On Ramadan days, after office ended early, she would stop by the stalls of iftar vendors to check what they had to offer and buy anything that she liked. "Jilapi is my most favourite iftar item. I do not find jilapi here and I miss it so much," she said. She recalls the special zarda that her mother used to prepare for her during Ramadan.

Among other things, Ali misses Dhaka's Eid shopping scene. "I miss Dhaka's Eid fashion trends and shopping scene, when shops and malls across the country are bedecked with lights, festoons, streamers, banners and hanging swirls, adding extra joy to Eid preparations," she said.

Eid ul-Fitr is a lonely affair for Ali in Shanghai. Last Eid ul-Fitr fell on a working day, so her husband had to go to the office, and her son to school. "I was alone at home



until late afternoon. Never before did I spend an Eid morning all by myself," she said.

However, in her new reality, thousands of miles away from home, Ali now tries to observe Ramadan and celebrate Eid ul-Fitr in her own way. She tries to make traditional iftar items and has decorated their apartment with Ramadan décor. She plans on buying fresh flowers on Chaand Raat, like she did in Dhaka, to bring holiday vibes to her new home in Shanghai.

Our NRBs miss their families the most during Ramadan, and the Eid that follows. The heart feels heavy and the distance more pronounced during these special occasions. And they fondly reminisce about the times they have left behind; the shared laughter, the lively conversations, and the comforting presence of friends, family, and relatives in their lives. However, life goes on, and our NRBs come to terms with their new reality, observing Ramadan and celebrating Eid ul-Fitr in their own distinct ways.

**Photo credit: Shahzia Sarwar, Portland, Oregon / Collected**