

The Significance of Eid-ul-Fitr and Ramadan

The Eid-ul-Fitr which marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan is celebrated for three consecutive days in major Muslim countries. In Mauritius where the Muslims constitutes a minority population, Eid ul Fitr is considered as a national festival and the Eid day is declared as public holiday. The festivities of Eid begin only after the crescent moon is seen. Eid ul-Fitr implies breaking of the fasting time frame, which goes on for a month during Ramadan. Eid constitutes an integral part of Ramadan. Eid cannot be complete without Ramadan.

During the holy month of Ramadan, many of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims commit to a strict daytime fast, and take the opportunity to make promises to improve their lives. Muslims in various places around the globe fast for different hours, due to the differing lengths of days. As the Northern Hemisphere is currently in summer, the longest fasting took place in Murmansk, Russia, which has only around three hours of darkness, with 20 hours and 45 minutes, while the shortest fasting hours in the Southern Hemisphere were in Ushuaia, Argentina, with just 11 hours. Mauritius, which is currently in winter season, had a fasting duration of around twelve and half hours per day.

Ramadan is a time of intense spirituality when believers are thought to be surrounded by angels, the gates of heaven open, and Allah's blessings and mercy are abundant. But it is also a time of great excitement, filling the homes with jubilation and bringing the neighbourhoods to life when the sun goes down. Fasting, held from dawn to dusk during Ramadan, is one of the Five Pillars (fundamental religious duties) of Islam. It is a time of self-examination and great religious devotion.

Fasting is meant to bring worshippers closer to God through steady remembrance, reflection and sacrifice. Daily fasting, combined with five daily prayers and extended evening prayers, challenges worshippers to focus on their actions, deeds and thoughts, rather than on material desires and instant gratification. Fasting is a reset for the mind, body and soul. Muslims are expected to show self-control and deeper spirituality during Ramadan. It is also a month of gratitude. By abstaining from food and water during the day, the faithful are reminded of those less fortunate.

Muslims must abstain from all eating, drinking or smoking from dawn to dusk each day for the entire lunar month, around 30 days. A single sip of water or coffee, or a puff of a cigarette, is enough to invalidate the fast. To prepare for the fast, Muslims wake for a pre-dawn meal called "sehri" or "suhoor." At the sunset, Muslims traditionally break their fast like the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) did some 1,400 years ago, with a sip of water and some dates. This act of breaking the fast is called Iftar. Today, the plate of iftar contains a variety of fruits and snacks which are shared with family and friends.

Zakat, the third Pillar of Islam, is the compulsory giving of a set proportion of one's wealth to charity. Zakat can be paid at any time of the year, but Muslims have the tendency to fulfil this obligation during the month of Ramadan. The payment of Zakat is based on the earnings that reflect one year's worth of net savings (one lunar year). Zakat does not refer to charitable gifts given out of kindness or generosity, but to the systematic giving of 2.5% of one's wealth each year to benefit the poor.

The end of Ramadan is marked by intense worship as Muslims ask to have their prayers answered during "Laylat ul-Qadr" or "the Night of Destiny." It is also known as Night of Power. Muslims believe that on this occasion, which is usually observed on the 27th day of Ramadan, Allah sent the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and revealed the first verses of the Quran. Muslims are instructed to seek the Night of Power during the last 10 days of Ramadan, particularly on the odd-numbered nights. It is reported that the prophet said, "Whoever stays up (in prayer and remembrance of Allah) on the Night of Qadr, fully believing (in Allah's promise of reward) and hoping to seek reward, he shall be forgiven for his past sins."

After these intense nights of prayer, the end of Ramadan is met with a holiday called Eid-ul-Fitr, which is celebrated on the first day of Shawwal, the month that follows Ramadan. Each culture throughout the world has different Eid traditions, but all of them begin with the morning Eid prayers in the mosque. As Muslims celebrate, they must never forget the less fortunate. Muslims start the day with an obligatory contribution called fitr in which prosperous families give away, for each member of their house, charity (cash or food-stuff at the rate of a prescribed weight) to the needy. It is meant to allow those families who are struggling to also celebrate Eid, buy new clothes, or gifts for their children. This charity is meant to lessen the burden of the underprivileged, those who have nothing to celebrate. Although Eid is meant to be a time of joy and celebration, one cannot divorce