

Ramadhaan is the 9th month of Islamic Calendar. It has very special significance for more than one billion Muslims around the world.

It was one night during Ramadhaan that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) started receiving the revelation of the Word of God through Archangel Gabriel. Muhammad (PBUH) was spending time in seclusion in the cave of Hira worshipping God, meditating and reflecting upon the plight of humanity, when the angel Gabriel appeared to him with the first revelation. Caught by surprise, Muhammad (PBUH) was frightened and shaken by this first experience. He soon recovered from the initial shock and the revelations continued for the next 23 years. These revelations constitute the Qur'aan that we, the Muslims, believe is the precise and literal Word of God.

For Muslims, the Qur'aan is the fundamental source of divine guidance and a complete code of life. It is also seen as a living miracle that non-Muslims of any time, era or age can experience until the Last Day. Although Muslims are required to read and benefit from the Qur'aan daily, Qur'aanic recitations becomes much more important during Ramadhaan. The Muslims try to read the entire Qur'aan at least once during this month. At night, Mosques arrange special services that are led by the persons who know the whole Qur'aan by heart. They recite it to the congregation in approximately equal parts to finish it within the nights of Ramadhaan.

The Most important feature of Ramadhaan is fasting. The fast prohibits all eating, drinking, and sexual activity from dawn to sunset, every day for the entire month. No intake into one's body, not even a sip of water, is allowed during this period. The normal satisfaction of bodily needs can be resumed, in moderation, each evening after sunset. To help them with their fast during the day, people are also strongly encouraged to have some food and drinks every morning (around 4 AM) before dawn – the starting time for the fast. No one is required to fast while sick, traveling or menstruating. Such people, however, must fast for the missed days when they are less vulnerable.

The fast, however, is much more than a restriction on bodily appetites. The fast is intended to prevail over all our senses. It is to help us guard against seeing, hearing or even contemplating any undesirable activity. Behaviours and social vices which are normally undesirable and unlawful for a Muslim become even more offensive and sinful during fasting. Lying, jealousy, arguments, fighting, use of abusive language, harsh words, gossiping, vain talk are some of the

things which observant Muslims always try to avoid. These kinds of undesirable behaviours are avoided extra-diligently when fasting during Ramadhāan. Forgiveness, graciousness and generosity are the kind of qualities Islam strongly encourages in its followers at all times. They become even more important during fasting.

This wholesome concept of fasting is designed to train Muslims to practise restraint, to resist temptations, to control their emotions, to improve their behaviour, and to get rid of undesirable traits they may have acquired throughout the year. In fact, fasting can have a profound effect on human behaviour if practised properly.

Just imagine, what a splendid society we would have if every human being learned to control his or her temptations, urges, desires and lusts. After all, aren't most crimes and social problems caused by people's lack of control over their behaviour?

Fasting is an act of worship with no outwardly visible manifestations. Whether someone is fasting or just pretending, only God knows. This invisibility gives fasting a special role in character building. When a fasting believer endures hunger and thirst all day, he or she feels the presence of God more intensely. Subconsciously, the faster becomes increasingly aware of God's infinite knowledge of our motives, intentions, ideas and actions. As this awareness grows and becomes part of the faster's personality, he becomes more vigilant over his own actions and intentions. In this way, fasting reforms the person from inside.

Although fasting is beneficial as an individual act, its benefits multiply when an entire community fasts together for a month. It creates a communal environment in which personal reformation and discipline becomes easier and more effective. During the fasting season, the Muslims gather socially in the evenings to break the fast together. They also spend more time worshipping together in the mosques. All this social interaction creates stronger bonds among community members.

Ramadhāan is also the month in which charity, an important theme in the Qur'aan, is most strongly emphasized. Fasting is intended to remind Muslims of the importance of helping fellow human beings. The pangs of hunger during the day remind the fasters of the agony of the deprived and starving people of the world. Being charitable both financially and socially is a life-long responsibility of a Muslim, but one which he or she must make a top priority during this month.

The month of Ramadhaan, thus, provides a holistic and comprehensive training program for human personality. The human personality has three dimensions: physiological, psychological and spiritual. All of the three dimensions are developed through Ramadhaan's wholesome training in excellence. Abstinence from physical needs during the day and reduction of sleep at night brings human urges under control and fine-tunes the physiological systems. Resisting temptations trains people psychologically. And, the fact that fasting, extra worship and charity are only for God's pleasure make the whole thing a superb spiritual experience which is further enhanced by the Qur'aanic recitation.

From a macro perspective, a society is made up of individuals who interact socially and economically. Fasting influences both the individuals and their interactions. It is a very individual (and private) act of worship; yet it works to strengthen the social bonds and takes care of the economic needs of the deprived segments of the society.

So, however you look at it, Ramadhaan is a month of blessings and virtues. The goodness of humanity blossoms in Ramadhaan like flowers in spring. If all Muslims start fasting in the proper spirit of Ramadhaan, Muslim society will be at peace within itself and its surroundings. And all humanity will benefit from the ripple effect.