

# Spirit and purpose of Haj

*Islam*

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*Dawn 14-1-05*

## Friday feature

MUSLIMS in large numbers, from all corners of the world, gather once every year in Makkah to perform the essential Haj pilgrimage. The number of pilgrims to the sacred land is increasing manifold; but the positive results, if any, are nowhere to be seen. Like other rituals, Haj is also seen as a congregation with no definite purpose attached to it except to absolve oneself of all sins and enter paradise. Many go to Haj with their bodies and few take their minds and reasoning.

Haj literally means "intention" and also stands for "prevention". There are three levels of this pilgrimage: The Haj of the body (walking, standing, collecting and throwing), the Haj of the mind (performing the rites with understanding) and the Haj of the heart (performed in total submission to the Almighty).

Every religious leader, thinker and priest repeatedly claims that Islam provides the solution to all problems faced by mankind, but these problems are never identified or mentioned. In contemporary times, Muslims are being ridiculed, criticized, victimized and insulted for creating "problems and subjecting humanity to suffering and terror". The most common belief is that Muslims in general and Islam in particular cannot provide any solution to the problems of mankind. A nation which cannot resolve its own

which this humanity need so badly. It is not all about the hereafter; it is about purifying oneself to lead a good life as emphasized in the Quranic prayer the pilgrims recite (2:201).

The Divine Revelation, in all ages, has always announced that race, colour, language, nation and nationality can never be the basis of superiority or man's domination by man. Despite the different nationalities, colours, races and languages, man is still a part of mankind. Those who do not accept this truth are termed as unbelievers. This in essence is also the two-nation concept. This message was given practical shape by Hazrat Ibrahim (Abraham) who left everything including his parents to settle in a desolate place called Makkah and laid the foundation of a new nation.

The pilgrimage and the rites connected with it are stated to be symbols of man's surrender

erable ancestor of the Jews Yaqoob (Jacob) also upheld the same way of life and told his children that they should abide by the system ordained for them by the Almighty throughout their lives (2:132). When the pilgrims raise their right hand in the direction of the Black stone (Hajr-e-aswad) and say 'Bismillah Allah Akbar', they make a solemn pledge they will honour their commitment to lead a life in accordance with Allah's directives. They reaffirm this pledge several times during Haj.

The annual congregation provides an opportunity for the believers from all parts of the world to become acquainted with the many social and political problems that confront the various geographically separated nations. When Ibrahim prayed to God to create favourable conditions and fruitful sustenance in Makkah for people to become inclined towards it (14:37), he was not referring to the concrete structure of Kaaba; but the Quranic system of which Kaaba was the core.

The seven-fold circumambulation (tawaf) is one of the rites of the Haj which indicates that all human beings ought to have the idea of God's Oneness for their centre.

The Kaaba is a source of guidance unto all mankind full of clear messages and whosoever enters it finds inner peace (397). The few hours of stay (wuqaf) at Arafat is the most important in a pilgrim's life as this gathering is the core of Haj congregation. It provides a foretaste of the Day of Judgment. The message of Arafat is simple: Turn, repent and submit to Allah. At this place the Prophet spoke on many issues

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and depend upon others and can never offer any suitable and satisfactory solution.

Muslims have to understand and realize the true spirit of all forms of prayers, especially Haj. It is the biggest congregation of human beings in one place and has a definite purpose of total dedication to divine Islamic values, which would ultimately prove beneficial to the whole of mankind. A cursory look at man's social history shows the purpose of Haj in a better way. Unlike the western philosophers, the Quran does not delve into details about the origin of society or social life. It says "All mankind were once but one single community and only later did they begin to hold divergent views, and had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from the Sustainer, all their differences would indeed have been settled (from the outset) (10:19)".

In other words, mankind would not have contended with one another after having received all evidence of the truth. They would all have held the same views (2:253). Since, however, such uniformity would have precluded man's intellectual, moral and social development, God has left to their reason, aided by prophetic guidance, to find their way to the truth (2:213).

According to Muhammad Asad, the expression 'Ummat-e-Wahid' (one single community) describing the original state of mankind, does not propound as might appear at first glance, the idea of a mythical 'Golden Age' obtaining in the dawn of man's history. What is alluded to in the verse is no more than the relative homogeneity of instinctive perceptions and inclinations characteristic of man's primitive social order.

Since this homogeneity was based on a lack of intellectual and emotional differentiation rather than on a conscious agreement among the members of society, it was bound to disintegrate in the measure of man's subsequent development. As his thought and life became more and more complex, his emotional capacity and needs, too, became more differentiated. Conflicts of views and interests and different political and social ideals and priorities came to the fore and mankind ceased to be "one single community".

Gradually, this gap widened and nations came into existence leading to more nations. Boundaries were marked, walls erected, iron curtains drawn and nations were on the lookout for their prey. The divine plan is to reunite man and for this purpose messengers (prophets) have been sent (2:213). The Haj congregation should be the main source of propagating God's message and system

to God. Haj is a micro-representation of the entire universal experience and man's unique position in it. Islamic traditions trace its origins to the appearance of man on earth. Of all pilgrimages of history, only the Haj has survived. It is a unique form of collective Ibadah (total submission) by a community of believers who seek Allah's mercy. The Kaaba is not the destination, it is the starting point of the pilgrim's promise and commitment to cast away his bad ways and begin afresh his new Allah-centred life.

The system of which the Kaaba has been declared as a centre, is the one which Ibrahim (Abraham) and Ismail (Ishmael) set up in order to propagate and practise the divine permanent values of Islam which would bring universal peace and harmony. The Quran says, "O you who believe if you aspire to attain Ibrahim's standing then you must follow his path and emulate his conduct. We had insisted that the builders of the Kaaba Ibrahim and Ismail should make this place the centre of a universal system undefiled by man-made beliefs and ideas" (2:125).

This centre was to be reserved for the organization and training of momineen (believers) who submit to the laws of God and their purpose in life would be to keep a vigil so that humanity is protected from danger and the outstanding problems are resolved. Building the Kaaba Ibrahim prayed to Allah "O Sustainer of all creations make this habitar a sanctuary for the oppressed people of the world" (2:136 and 95:3) "and grant all the bounties of life abundantly" (14:37) to those who believe in the truth of His laws and in the hereafter. Allah said, "Verily they will receive life's bounties. Regarding those who reject the divine laws they too in accordance with Our physical laws will get immediate gains of life (17:18,19,20) but would eventually become wretched (2:126).

Continuing their prayer as they raised the walls of the Kaaba, Ibrahim and Ismail said, "O our Sustainer, our supplication is that by associating with this centre we and our future generations should live according to Your code directives. O our Sustainer, show us the way whereby we can reach the destination you have promised for humanity and continue to receive Your bounties and blessings for such is Your law that it brings the means of nurture to anyone who makes an effort to obey it" (2:127-129).

This was the way of life followed by Ibrahim which made him the chosen one both in this world and the hereafter. He also exhorted his sons to do so. Likewise the ven-

women's rights and called on those present to spread this message to those not there. Today, many go to Haj without any knowledge of this sermon.

In the pre-Islamic period, too, the Haj was performed but only for fun and frolic. The Kaaba under the Quraish was the centre of Arab social life and the congregation was mainly festive in nature. The Arabic word hujjat (proof or conclusive argument) is also a derivative of the word Haj. That is why the Quranic proofs have been called 'Hujjatul Balagha' (2:149).

These proofs have to be presented in a logical and responsible way for the solution of problems prevailing in present times. The Quran did not do away with Haj congregations, but after the conquest of Makkah it was brought in line with the directives of God. In the 9th year of the Hijra the Prophet (PBUH) did not go to Makkah but sent Abu Bakr as his representative. In 10 Hijri he himself performed the Haj and delivered the last sermon with the first proclamation of human rights.

The annual congregation free from all prejudices of race, colour, and language was a true reflection of Islamic values. Apart from Muslims from far corners of Arabia, government officials were also invited. Pilgrims were free to discuss their grievances. For this big congregation the plains of Arafat provided the right place (Arafat means occasion or mutual introduction or 'Ta'aruf'). The urgent problems of the day were discussed and the head of state or his representative in his sermon (khuṭba) outlined the programme and plans for the next year to be followed and implemented by Muslims in their respective areas of influence.

Haj in modern times has become more of an individual worship. As Islam has been changed into a religion from deen, man-made concepts have sidetracked the main purpose of all ibadah which means total submission to Allah's directives, and not worship. The lack of positive results is mainly due to the divisions among Muslims.

A mammoth congregation like Haj should create fear and awe among the others. This important source of Muslim strength has been hijacked by obscurantists, politicians, bigots and commercial entrepreneurs who are the beneficiaries. Weak nations like us can only abuse our enemies. Muslims simply pray during the Haj and return empty-handed without pondering over the real issues and evaluating their role in the uplift of the Muslim ummah.