

Pakistan: Intolerance and bullying during Ramazan

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The increase in penalty for eating or drinking publicly during the month of Ramazan, from Rs500 to Rs25,000 (for hotel owners), brought considerable attention to the “Ehteram-e-Ramazan Ordinance”. Apart from the fine, the law stipulates a three-month jail term for any offender. The rationale for the ordinance came under further scrutiny when Bakhtawar Bhutto Zardari critically contrasted the harshness of this law to the rather benign treatment meted out to some of the most renowned terrorists.

In a pathetic display of their pre-Ramazan fury, Ms Bhutto was subjected to a substantial amount of online abuse by the ever vigilant brigade of the faithful. Before commenting on this rage of the self-righteous, it is pertinent to analyse what such laws reveal about state, citizenship, and spirituality in Pakistan.

We have all heard and studied what virtues the month of Ramazan aims to inculcate in the privileged sections of society; a sense of solidarity for the oppressed, generosity and kindness for those most vulnerable, and perhaps most importantly, a process of self-reflection in order to learn humility and modesty.

If these are the salient virtues of Ramazan, then one can imagine the various actions a state run by Muslims could undertake to demonstrate the sanctity of the month, particularly keeping in mind the intense heatwave in which so many citizens will fast this year. For example, as a display of kindness and generosity, the state could commit to lowering the costs of healthcare, housing and basic commodities, and an uninterrupted provision of electricity during the holy month. None of this is, however, on the agenda, and even the price controls announced every year by the government fail to materialise as the price of essential commodities shoot up during Ramazan.

The lethal result of the combination of a crumbling infrastructure, government indifference and soaring temperatures was witnessed two years ago in Karachi, where over a thousand people, mostly working class, died due to heat-strokes. This huge loss of life even created a burial crisis, since enough land was not available to bury the dead bodies. Next year, the local administration prepared for Ramazan by digging mass graves in anticipation of the inevitable loss of human life during the month, so that the deceased could at least find some dignity in death.

One can then easily imagine where the focus of the ‘Ehteram ordinance’ should be directed: the elderly, the sick, the homeless, and those doing manual work in this heat. Yet, even when it comes to a month where no power less than the Divine Himself is ordering generosity and kindness, the Pakistani state’s imagination of intervention remains restricted to a singular site – the jail.

Pakistan is now a punitive state par excellence, and its policies during Ramazan are nothing but symptomatic of its violent relationship to its citizens. It is like a father who has abandoned his children for all practical purposes, but is ready to use the whip to remind them who they owe their

existence to. Such a state is neither interested in earning respect for itself nor in preserving the sanctity of Ramazan. It is only interested in securing obedience through fear, pure and simple.

This drive towards excessive policing has now permeated the entire social body. It becomes particularly pronounced during Ramazan, where everyone seems to have received a divine licence to intrude into each other's private space. We all remember how at school, we were extremely concerned about our image in front of our peers in case we missed a fast. A major reason was that those fasting, or feigning to do it, would mock and bully those who decided not to partake in offerings of the blessed month. Thus, it was common for students to pretend to be fasting even when they were not, so as to avoid any insults from those who had reached the peaks of divinity. The fear of social shame always trumped spiritual concerns, since God can be forgiving, but His army of believers surely has no patience for the deviant.

Children embarrass adults not because they do not know how things work, but because they have not fully learnt the art of concealing the truth. This is why what we experienced in schools is by and large symptomatic of social attitudes towards religion. If a person is truly undergoing a spiritual experience, one ought to be so engrossed in the moment so as to lose track of oneself, let alone of others. Even a good cricket match, like the recent one won by Pakistan against the West Indies, has the effect of totally removing you from people and processes in your surroundings. Surely, a divine experience would be more intense than watching cricket?

Yet, we must ask why religious people in Pakistan find so much time to indulge in endless fights over how 'others' should be behaving. Such self-righteousness is often misdiagnosed as a sign of excessive religiosity, whereas the opposite is true. It is a symptom of a lack of belief, where mundane matters of social status, hierarchy and a will to dominate others overwhelms the quest for the divine. Therefore, Ramazan today, rather than delineating a new spiritual path for us, has itself become a victim of the dominant logic of the world we inhabit, whether in the shape of the endless subliminal exhortations on TV shows to consume more, or in the desire to control and overpower others in society.

This was clearly manifested last year, when an 82-year-old Hindu man was tortured by a police constable in Multan for consuming food that he had received from a charity organisation. To de-humanise a fellow human being is the exact opposite of the humility, kindness and patience one is supposed to learn from fasting. What is worse is that such policing is justified by the absurd argument that people not practising religious injunctions 'hurt our feelings'. Fasting is supposed to be an experience in which one finally moves beyond the pettiness of one's own ego, and finds one's being in the suffering and happiness of others. By attacking others for 'hurting' our feelings, we confirm our confinement within the cage of crude individualism and materialism. It is a spectacular victory of the ego against the divine injunction to move beyond it.

Today, we must remind ourselves that fasting does not give us a licence to unleash our fury on others who make different choices than us. If anything, it should make us more empathetic, to help us relate to those with whom we thought we had nothing in common, to experience the infinite multiplicity of the Divine without desiring to dominate it through our own finite understanding.

As for those running the state, instead of judging the religiosity of the general public, they should use this month as an opportunity to self-reflect, and feel some shame at failing to provide the basic necessities of life to millions of ordinary citizens. The day our government is able to provide the basic necessities to the citizenry, and ordinary people become magnanimous towards each other, we will not need to scare anyone with an 'Ehteram-e-Ramazan Ordinance', since the very ethos underlying Ramazan would become part of the fabric of our everyday life.

Ammar Ali Jan

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P.S.

The writer is an assistant professor at Punjab University, Lahore and member of the People's Solidarity Forum.

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