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# RAMADAN IN BANGLADESH



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-- June 19, 2015 was the beginning of Holy Ramadan in Bangladesh. In the evening, families and friends gathered to share food, and with the rise of the sun the next morning, the month of fasting began. --

## DAILY SCHEDULE

## FASTING

Fasting not only entails the elimination of food during the hours of sunlight, but also drinking (all beverages, including water), smoking, sex and “impure thoughts”, which can include violence, sexual thoughts and curse words. Sometimes people will also avoid swallowing their own saliva, as it can be seen as a form of water. Of course, the degree to which people fast varies immensely between individuals. Many people who do physical labour, such as rickshaw drivers, continue to drink water, and sometimes eat throughout the day. For non-Muslims, labourers or others who do not fast for Ramadan, there are still food places available to eat.



However, street vendors often cover their food areas with a large sheet so that others cannot see the customers eating. This is done out of respect for those fasting. Similarly, even for those not fasting, it is disrespectful to smoke or drink water in the street.

During Ramadan in Bangladesh, daily routines are changed and the whole city of Dhaka seems to enter into a new schedule. Many people begin their days around 3am, with a pre-dawn meal called *Subhoor*, followed by a prayer at 4am. Throughout the day, there are scheduled prayer times at 5am, 12pm, and 3:30 pm. Once the sun has set around 7pm, it is time for Iftar, the breaking of the fast. For half an hour, all stores are closed and the streets empty, as everyone gathers to eat. Iftar is followed by a prayer, and the final prayer of the day occurs an hour later. At this time, the city is filled with the sounds of singing and ringing of bells, as mosques call the people to prayer.

## THE QUR'AN

In the Holy Qur'an, the legal and spiritual aspects of Ramadan can be found in Al-Baqarah. Legal aspects include rules about when, where and how to fast, as well as exceptions for fasting (travel, illness, etc.). The passage also speaks to the spiritual purpose of fasting. In Bangla, the passage reads:

! রোযা হে ঈমানদারগণ তোমরা তোমরাও সতর্ক † হতে পারে যে .তোমাদের পূর্ববর্তীদের জন্য নির্ধারিত হয়

A loose translation: “Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may attain *taqwa*.” (Q2:183). Like many other religions, fasting in Islam can be considered a way to gain increased consciousness and to protect oneself from evil. In order to better understand the complexities of this practice, I asked different people to share their understandings and reasons for fasting. I heard a variety of different answers:

**“I fast because I am a Muslim. It is a rule”.**

Fasting, *Sawm* is one of the five pillars of Islam. The other four include *Salat*: performing ritual prayer five times a day, *Zakat*: giving money or charity to the poor and *Hajj*: a pilgrimage to Mecca.

**“Fasting helps us to understand the plight of the poor”.**

Experiencing hunger can help understand the daily struggles of those who struggle to nourish themselves, and must often live with an ache in their stomachs.

# “I fast to become strong, to practice self-control and self-discipline”.

Fasting is a physical battle, where the heart must be stronger than the physical needs of the body. Restraining from eating and drinking takes a great deal of will power to overcome physical urges and to commit to fasting.

## IFTAR



*Iftar* is the daily breaking of the fast, which occurs at dusk. The traditional food of iftar in Bangladesh includes an assortment of different fruits, sweets and fried snacks.



According to the prophet Muhammed, the fast should be broken with sweet foods, traditionally dates and lemon sorbot (a sweet lemon water beverage), and often followed by apples, oranges and cucumbers. Afterwards, fried snacks



are eaten along with *muri* (puffed rice) and *chola* (curried, cooked chickpeas). This includes samosas, Dap puri (lentil pastry), piyajoo (fried lentil paste with chopped onions and green chillies), onion



pakoras, meat kabobs and other varieties of fried potato, meat and chickpea/lentil. Sometimes all of the snacks are mixed together and mashed, and jilapi is added (fried batter, doused in syrup).

I have been fortunate to have been invited to share iftar with friends on numerous occasions, sometimes even to large gatherings known as “iftar parties”.



Beforehand, the food is laid out, the drinks are poured, and then everyone sits patiently. When the clock strikes the designated iftar time, everyone suddenly goes quiet as we enjoy the meal. After eating, those who are



Muslim go to pray, and people often meet up again a few hours later to eat a night time meal.

## MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

As Muslims across the country join together in the sacred practice of fasting, I also practiced fasting in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the experience. Although I was only able to fast for 6 days, and did not eliminate water during the day, I found that I developed a great appreciation for the practice. The aching feeling in my stomach was a constant reminder of my hunger, and I began to develop a greater appreciation for the everyday presence of food when not fasting. I also found I was more selective about what food I consumed after iftar, as I knew that it would have to last me the whole day. I found that when I finally did eat in the evening, my body didn't require much food, as my appetite had decreased considerably. My fasting experience pushed me to reflect on my everyday eating habits, and my tendency to eat when food is available or during assumed meal times, and not necessarily when my body requires it. Intriguingly, I also found that I had more time in my day, due to the absence of food preparation and eating. It is amazing how much of my regular days are spent preparing, eating or thinking about food! Because my mind and time was not occupied with food, I was able to place my focus elsewhere.

An essential part of Ramadan fasting in Islam is the spiritual aspect. Although I did not participate in the 5 daily Muslim prayers, I incorporated my own spiritual practices into my daily routines. Instead of eating breakfast in the morning, I would meditate for 30-60 minutes. During lunch time, instead of eating I would have some time to reflect and pause during the day. And before falling asleep, I would finish my day with another meditation or prayer. I found this experience to be very powerful, and look forward to fasting once again in the last week of Ramadan.

## MIGRATION DURING RAMADAN

During the month of Ramadan, there is also a tradition of sharing food with strangers, and giving money to those in need. In response to this practice, the amount of beggars in the street increases throughout the month, especially women and children, elderly men and women, and people with physical disabilities. The streets of Dhaka also fill up with migrant workers coming to the city from rural areas across Bangladesh. These seasonal migrants are often vendors, labourers or drivers, who are hoping to make money before returning home for Eid ul-Fitre. Because of the culture of high consumerism before Eid, these migrants can make decent earnings as people shop for gifts and clothes. The flood of people entering the city is quite noticeable, as day by day the traffic seems to get



way more congested and traffic accidents increase. These traffic jams are exasperated by the stormy weather that floods and blocks the street ways.

## EID UL-FITRE

The end of the month of Holy Ramadan is marked by the holiday of Eid ul-Fitr, which represents the first day of the Islamic month of Shawwal. Based on the lunar calendar, this year in Bangladesh, Eid ul-Fitr falls on July 18, and the days before and after are public holidays. During this time, many people leave the city to return home to their families in the villages. Although I have not yet experienced Eid ul-Fitr, I have been told that trains and buses are packed full of people, with thousands cramming in and on top of vehicles, leaving the city seemingly empty. For Eid, many Muslims attend communal prayers at the mosques, give charity to those in need, share food, dress in fine clothes and give money to children. Eid ul-Fitre is a time to give thanks to Allah, celebrate the strength gained from fasting in Ramadan and to feast with family and friends