

Analysis of Shab-e-Barat

Introduction:

This article is for both Muslims and Not-Muslims alike. Shab-e-Barat is a religious innovation (called *Bid'ah* in Arabic), which crept into Islam. The general time of the observation of this event is mid-Shaban of the Arabic calendar system¹. In some other countries, depending on their countries' global positioning, and times for sunset and moon birth, the event may be a day earlier or later, taking into consideration the rotational tilt of the earth at 28.5-degrees to vertical. This information on Shab-e-Barat is a matter of widespread common knowledge only, but it is not a prescribed event in the Holy Qur'an, and not as a matter of religious compulsion to be practised by all Muslims the world over. There are comparative variations in many parts of the world.

Discussion on Analysis of Shab-e-Barat:

- 1) There is no specific mention of Shab-e-Barat anywhere in the Muslims' principal scripture, the Holy Qur'an. This event is also variously known as *Laylatul Bara'ah* or *Laylatun Nisfe min Sha'ba* in some countries' collective expressions. The Holy Qur'an is silent on this issue, regardless of different names. On the contrary, many Muslims throughout the world have assumed Shab-e-Barat as the Night of Salvation. These Muslims involve themselves in fasting, seeking forgiveness from Almighty God and offering prayers for their deceased relatives.
- 2) Shab-e-Barat is an early but subtly friendly warning event, as mid-point of the Islamic month of Shaban, that the next month following is Ramadan, the prescribed holy month of Muslims' fasting². In fact Shab-e-Barat warns Muslims inasmuch as the amber light (orange) is an early warning system of "preparing to stop" before the red light in any traffic light controlled intersection. In a nutshell, Shab-e-Barat is mid-point or the 15th day of the 8th month (Shaban) in Islamic calendaring system. This early warning is around 2 weeks prior, allowing people to get their household

¹ Islamic calendaring system has 12 months in a year but is based on lunar cycles, which gives 354 or 355 days in a year (Muharram to Zu'l-Hijjah), as compared to the Gregorian calendar, which is solar based and which gives 365 or 366 days in a year (January to December). The extra day is for leap year. The difference is that Islamic calendar is around 11 days shorter, when both compared end to end. These calendars run in their own stream and are not fettered by one to the other.

² This is standalone fasting of 29-30 days in the month of Ramadan, essential for those in good health.

inventory in order in preparation for fasting and finally culminating to Eid-ul-Fitr.

- 3) Ramadan is that self-assessment and testing period for Muslims to go in their lives prescriptively correct, as compliant insofar as self-discipline, self-control, purity, charity and obedience to Almighty God matter. In a nutshell, if people can pass this testing period of a month, then people must continue with that same trend of compliance for the next 11 months towards perpetuity. That is an expectation in the Islamic calendar month of Ramadan.
- 4) However, from historical past, there were in the main, three calendar systems which affected the communities living in and around what is today regarded as the Middle East. All territories covered under the invasions by the Roman Empire, were compelled to use the Julian calendar system³. The Jews were using their own calendar system⁴. The Arab Muslims were also using their own calendar system⁵. There were times when the three calendar systems overlapped one another, and there were also times when events of communities coincided with one another.
- 5) There was one such time on the Muslims' month of 10th Muharram⁶, which coincided with the Jews celebration of their Passover⁷ and witnessed by Prophet Muhammad⁸ (*pbuh*). When he asked what all the

³ The Julian calendar system was initiated by Roman Emperor Julius Caesar in 46BC. The months started with March and ended with February (named after Roman gods) of 10 months in 304 days. Later it was increased to 12 months and 365 days. The calendar ran in numerical order of days 1-365. In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII changed the calendar to present format of 365/366 days with leap years.

⁴ The Jewish calendar system is somewhat complex: It uses lunar months but years are solar based years. Current decade in Hebrew calendar system is year 5770.

⁵ Please refer to Footnote 1.

⁶ That particular 10th Muharram event (the Jews' Passover or Pesach) must not be confused with that for Shia Muslims, for whom, it is a major religious commemoration of the martyrdom at Karbala of Hussein, (son of Caliph Ali), a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*). It also falls on the 10th of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar.

⁷ The Jewish Passover (called *Pesach*) is celebration of the successful release from Egyptian bondage and crossing over of 3.5 million Israelites at Northern end of Red Sea, led by Prophet Moses (*as*).

⁸ Narrated by Ibn 'Abbas: "The Prophet came to Medina and saw the Jews fasting on the day of Ashura, which was coincidentally the 10th Muharram. He asked them about that. They replied, "This is a good day, the day on which Allah rescued Bani Israel from their enemy. So, Moses fasted this day." The Prophet said, "We have more claim over Moses than you." So, the Prophet fasted on that day and ordered (the Muslims) to fast (on that day)." (Sahih Bukhari, Book #31, Hadith #222). It was important to get Arab Muslims to fast that day and thereby prevent Arab Muslims from partaking in all Jewish religious ceremonies and getting Arab Muslims assimilated into Judaism.

celebration and widespread feasting was all about, he was told that the Jews were celebrating the successful crossing over of the Red Sea by Prophet Moses *(as)* and the Israelites (Exodus in Bible).

- 6) Prophet Muhammad *(pbuh)* observed and noted that so many of the Arab Muslims were also participating and feasting in the Passover (*Pesach*). This could have had detrimental effect upon Arab Muslims in their allegiance to Islam. Prophet Muhammad *(pbuh)* immediately informed the Jews⁹ that Muslims had higher respect for Prophet Moses *(as)* (mentioned 140 times in the Holy Qur'an) than Jews, and accordingly he took to fasting that day. The Arab Muslims followed suit and did not further participate in the Jews' celebrations and feasting in their Passover (*Pesach*).
- 7) It is indeed prudent to take a global analysis on Shab-e-Barat. Mainly the peoples of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and to lesser extent the peoples of Iran and Afghanistan celebrate Shab-e-Barat as significant annual event. The ideologies applied by these communities differ both geographically and to some extent politically, when certain of their Governments allow the event to be celebrated nation-wide. Although the principal scripture, the Holy Qur'an does not impose any specific observation and practice of Shab-e-Barat, the diasporas of these Muslim communities, especially from India, have continued and carried their beliefs on Shab-e-Barat as customary and "unnecessary excess luggage" to their Muslim cultures.
- 8) This practice differs significantly amongst different Divisions¹⁰ within Islam; and this document positively clarifies that celebration of Shab-e-

⁹ What unites as point of commonality between Muslims and Jews is both their firm beliefs and practices that there is only One God – the Almighty God – and there is no other associate or any imaginable description of partner to Almighty God. The apex to their commonalities links with Prophet Abraham. The elder and first son of Prophet Abraham was Prophet Ishmael, from whom descended only one prophet, which is Prophet Muhammad *(pbuh)*. The younger or second son was Prophet Isaac, from whom descended Prophet Jacob and from whom further descended his twelve sons. These twelve sons pioneered and became the Twelve Tribes of Israel. In looseness of relationship, Arabian Muslims and Jews are very distant cousins. Muslims have Shari'ah (religious laws) and Jews have Halakha (laws based on Torah). Names of prophets in the Holy Qur'an are also mentioned in the Torah (except Prophets Jesus and Muhammad *(pbuh)*. They both came after the Torah came into existence).

¹⁰ There are 72 Division groups within Islam, which have developed out of the two mainstream sects. The two mainstream sects are: (1). Sunni, (2). Shia. The Sunni have 60 Divisions and Shia have 12 Divisions. Wahhabi is under widespread umbrella of Sunni and Sufi is mystical and can be from either Sunni or Shia. Sunni are the largest (at 70-80% - all over the world) followed by Shia (15-20% and its highest density is in Iran and all countries bordering Iran, and then thinning out to other countries). Out of these mainstream Divisions evolve Islamic Schools of Law, of which there so many.

Barat is not a matter of religious compulsion within the total of Islam *per se*.

- 9) Since all aspects in broad spectrum of different Hadith¹¹ are not widely accepted Islam-wide¹², but some are accepted in certain communities only, the issue of Shab-e-Barat develops its inherent weakness and becomes questionable.
- 10) Taking full cognizance of the required tact in diplomacy and respect, it is not to comment on other sects' and Divisions' beliefs and practices on any issue.
- 11) On the contrary, communities which spend cumulatively millions of dollars (or other currency) in lavish foods, festoon lights, fireworks, etc. on Shab-e-Barat would be better guided to redeploy such resources towards charity, welfare funds and maintenance of mosques as practical examples of spending such funds.
- 12) Since the diaspora of Indians has reached many countries, it is perhaps mindful to study the history of Indians in a nutshell. The event of Shab-e-Barat is also known by different names in different communities and geographies, as already elaborated above.
- 13) It is also necessary to dwell into and understand some of the significant events which impacted upon India over the last 400-500 years ago, commencing with Delhi Muslim Sultanate (1206-1526), the Mughal Empire (1526-1857) and the British Raj (1858-1947), which finally led to independence and partition of India and Pakistan in August 1947. During these very trying times (1206-1857), the Indian communities were under intense pressures, where on one hand, the Muslim Rulers imposed strict Muslim prescriptions, and on the other hand the mixed Indian populace went through transformations, which included conversions from other faiths to Islam and some extent of religious cross-marriages.
- 14) Islam was periodically infused with Arabic, Turkish, Afghani and Persian culture-mix and not forgetting Hindu influences, especially during the reign of Mughal Emperor Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar (1542-1605), who accommodated these cultural and religious interventions. It should also be noted, that such non-prescribed "add-ons" are prevalent only in

¹¹ There are a total of 2,200 hadiths books (without repetition). There are 1,400 authentic hadiths that are reported in other books, mainly the six major hadith collections (*Sahih Hadith*). All different hadith were written many decades after the death of Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) in 632AD.

¹² Many of these lesser known Hadith are commonly referred to as "rather weak."

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and to lesser extent by the peoples of Iran and Afghanistan.

- 15)** Millions of Muslims in the rest of the world¹³ have mostly not even heard of the term “Shab-e-Barat” let alone celebrating it. The Mughals¹⁴ actually allowed introduction of foreign rituals to some extent within Islam in India. The distribution of sweets/halva to friends and relatives was the symbolic equivalent of distributing “prashad by Hindus” (with due respect) during the Mughal regime in India. Hence the earlier comment of customary and “unnecessary excess luggage” introduced to their cultures in India and to the Indian diaspora.

Conclusions on Analysis of Shab-e-Barat:

- a) Shab-e-Barat is not stipulated as a compulsive and prescriptive requirement in Holy Qur’an.
- b) There are mentions of Shab-e-Barat only in few of the 2,200 Hadith books but not all Hadith.
- c) Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) did not celebrate Shab-e-Barat, in the same manner as it is done today, by many Muslim communities in many parts of this world.
- d) Compelling communities to accept practices not in the Holy Qur’an is a religious innovation (called *Bid’ah* in Arabic).
- e) Shab-e-Barat is an apt reminder for month of Ramadan approaching in next 2 weeks.

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¹³ Other than Asian languages speaking communities as Muslims.

¹⁴ A Persian terminology, which is taken to mean cross-cultured combination of Turkish and Mongols, who ruled northern and greater part of India to the Deccan region.