

Fast 2: Fasting in religions before Islam

- The Holy Quran says:

“O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you **as it was prescribed for those before you**, so that you may guard against evil.”
(2:183)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ
الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن
قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨٣﴾

- As stated in this verse, fasting is a spiritual practice to be found in all religions. In fact, the great Founders of various faiths (Buddha, Moses, Jesus, etc.) practised quite rigorous fasting as a preliminary to attaining their first experience of spiritual enlightenment and communion with God. Moses told his followers:

“When I went up into the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the Lord made with you, then I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water.” (Deuteronomy, 9:9)

Similarly, about Jesus it is written in the Gospel of Matthew that he “fasted forty days and forty nights” (4:2) before beginning his ministry, and he explained the purpose of fasting by quoting from the scripture of Moses as follows:

“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’.” (Matthew, 4:4)

- Apart from the hard fasting by Founders of religions, there was also fasting by the ordinary followers. The purpose of fasting was self-purification, as mentioned in the Quran above. But fasting came to be regarded as a form of voluntary suffering to evoke the sympathy of God and avert punishment from Him. Probably how this happened was that when some disaster came upon people, as it was considered to be because of people’s sins, so they resorted to fasting as a means of *repentance from sins*. Therefore, fasting became associated in people’s minds with times when they faced some trouble or affliction, and they thought fasting was a way of showing God their self-inflicted pain, so that feeling sorry for them He would remove their troubles.
- Islam *rejected entirely* the idea that people, in order to avert God’s anger and get His compassion, should inflict some voluntary suffering or punishment on themselves. Instead of this wrong idea, Islam introduced regular fasting in a fixed month, regardless of whether people were facing some trouble, so that it would be a means of the development of the inner human faculties.

- In pre-Islamic scriptures also, one can read about the true significance of fasting. Jesus gave his followers these instructions:

“Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance (i.e., looking gloomy). For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting... But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” (Matthew, 6:16–18)

There is a good lesson in this for Muslims also. It is stated in a hadith in Bukhari that God says in regard to the person who is fasting:

“He refrains from food and drink and other desires to seek My pleasure: fasting is for Me only and I will grant its reward; and a virtue brings reward ten times like it.”

- There was a prophet called Isaiah, between times of Moses and Jesus. The Israelites complained to him that God had not seen or noticed that they had been fasting, and not removed their troubles. God gave Isaiah the answer to their complaint:

“Look, at the same time you fast, you satisfy your selfish desires, you oppress your workers. Look, your fasting is accompanied by arguments, brawls, and fistfights. Do not fast as you do today, trying to make your voice heard in heaven. Is this really the kind of fasting I want? Do I want a day when people merely humble themselves, bowing their heads like a reed and stretching out on sackcloth and ashes? Is this really what you call a fast, a day that is pleasing to the Lord?

No, this is the kind of fast I want. I want you to remove the sinful chains, to tear away the ropes of the burdensome yoke, to set free the oppressed, and to break every burdensome yoke. I want you to share your food with the hungry and to provide shelter for homeless, oppressed people. When you see someone naked, clothe him! Don't turn your back on your own flesh and blood! Then your light will shine like the sunrise; your restoration will quickly arrive; your godly behaviour will go before you, and the Lord's splendour will be your rear guard. Then you will call out, and the Lord will respond; you will cry out, and he will reply, 'Here I am.' You must remove the burdensome yoke from among you and stop pointing fingers and speaking sinfully. You must actively help the hungry and feed the oppressed. Then your light will dispel the darkness, and your darkness will be transformed into noonday.” (Isaiah, 58:3–10)