Muslims at Galle Face for Eid prayers

Ramazan, Islam's holiest month and celebration of Eid by Muslims is an appreciation of rituals and an embodiment of fellowship. In Sri Lanka's multicultural society, it is a celebration, as everyone shares in the joy of the festivities.

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Photography: BT Images

The Fast

The time to begin and end the fast varies somewhat according to locality. The fasting period from sunrise to sunset - 5.40am to 6.20pm - among Muslims in Sri Lanka that began on May 27, 2017 will continue on until June 26, 2017.
Life goes on as usual, with adults at work in shops and offices. Muslim schools close during the month of Ramazan. At home, the atmosphere is quite laidback. Tiring oneself in the tropical temperature of Sri Lanka is not an option, so mostly people prefer to remain indoors and also women avoid strenuous household chores. After dusk, as the traffic eases, the suburbs and by-lanes are abuzz with youth playing outdoors.

**Praying**

Ramazan is a time of prayer. The night and day prayers, in addition to the daily obligatory prayers, express the principal meaning of Ramazan. The Tahajjud prayer is recited upon waking, proceeded by the morning meal. Fajr, the Morning Prayer follows. While men go to the mosque, women remain at home for prayers following the morning meal. The day is usually spent in prayer, reading and reciting the Holy Quran. Prayer dominates as people end the fast at dusk. Dinner is followed by a time of prayer that continues for another hour or two before retiring for the day. Muslims are encouraged to pray as much as 20 times a day during the month of fasting. Through technology, today they have daily Ramazan prayer times at their fingertips.

**The Meals**

They wake up around 3am in the morning for a meal before beginning the fast. Generally rice and curry is preferred to get them through the day. At dusk, the fast is usually broken by consuming a few dates and water or fruit juice. In the mosques men sit down for a special nutritious porridge known as kanji made of rice with either beef, chicken or mutton and vegetables, or a combination of all. The kanji prepared at mosques and homes is distributed to neighbouring households and the underprivileged. Kanji is also consumed when people break fast at home, along with snacks such as samosa, pakora, patties, rolls, cookies and fruits. Dinner that follows may vary from roti, rice and curry to pittu, string-hoppers to bread. Being a time of sharing, households do not hesitate to send a jug of kanji to their neighbours or friends.

Ramazan is not a simple ritual. It is a programme for believers to align their emotions in line with Allah's aspirations; particularly to abstain from negative, illegal and harmful behaviour. Thus, those observing the Ramazan Fast must be devout during the period. They must help one another and peacefully coexist. During their fast they should uphold the rights of others as well as their own, be charitable to uplift the lives of others and behave cordially.

**Festival Day**

Upon sighting the crescent moon on June 25, sometimes before or after, the religious leaders of the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, will declare the end of the fast and the beginning of Eid al-Fitr festivities.

As the sunrises the next day, all wake up for prayer before a breakfast of pittu or string-hoppers. Donning new clothes, they gather at mosques, prayer halls or in an open park or ground, men and women who come together separate for prayer, followed by a sermon and ending in prayer. Those living in Colombo and its suburbs congregate at the extensive Galle Face Green on the morning of Eid to declare the festival in prayer and worship.

After greeting one another and exchanging wishes, people head to the parental home for the grand Eid lunch. The atmosphere is relaxed as extended families greet each other and exchange gifts. Depending on the locality, fun collective games and bicycle races are organised, which again is a unique Sri Lankan form of festive enjoyment.

**Festive Meal**

Sharing food in Sri Lanka is a beloved tradition. And so it is at Eid, as friends and neighbours eagerly await a large plate of Biryani with aromatic flavours. Biryani in Sri Lanka is prepared best by Muslims! It is a heavily flavoured rice cooked in ghee. Biryani is served along with roasted chicken or mutton, beef curry, kalia curry - prepared using eggplant, potatoes and ash plantains, achcharu - favourite Sri Lankan sweet and sour pickle prepared with whole red onions, and green chillies mixed in a syrup of vinegar, sugar and salt. A combination of deep fried onions and shredded Maldive fish is another tasty accompaniment to the Biryani. The Malay pickle, an exotic blend of whole red onions, capsicums, dates and spices is common in urban areas.

Watalappam is with no doubt, an unmatched dessert at Eid. It is a steamed pudding of fresh coconut milk, kitul jaggery, eggs and spices such as cardamom, mace and nutmeg. The custard pudding garnished with cashew and plums is another option. Sweet treats of dodol and muscat, melt-in-the-mouth peni walalu, literally meaning loops of honey, and moulds of colourful moss jelly and crunchy diamond-shaped murukku coated in sugar-syrup are traditional delights served among family and shared with neighbours and friends.

Ramazan is both a time of great spirituality and fellowship for Muslims in Sri Lanka.

*Information provided by Dr M Ismath Ramzy*