

Ismaili Festivals

Stories of Celebration



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That is an example of the kind of piety that fasting in Ramadan is intended to instil: becoming more conscious of the needs of others. In many ways, it is intended to make us more human. I wonder, however, how much of this dimension gets lost in all the shopping, parties, music, decorations, and other celebrations. That is not to say that there is anything wrong with such festivities – indeed, even the Prophet appears to have chided his close companion for rebuking children who were playing on a tambourine on the occasion of Eid.¹⁸ But rather, amidst all the enjoyment of Eid, it is important not to forget those less fortunate and to make a concerted effort to share our bounties with them.

Chapter 4

Honouring the Prophet's Life and Legacy on Milad al-Nabi

Shah-i Medina, shah-i Medina,

O lord of Medina, O lord of Medina

Yathrib ke vali

O protector of the [city of] Yathrib

Saray nabi teray dar ke savali

All prophets supplicate at your threshold

Jalvay hai(n) saray teray hi dam say

All splendour (of this world) is due to you

Abad alam teray karam say

This world flourishes through your grace

Baqi har ik shey naqshay khayali

Everything else is a figment of imagination

Teray liye hi dunya bani hay

This world was created for you

Neelay falak ki chadar tani hay

The blue sky is spread for you

Tu(n) gar na hota dunya thi khali

If it was not for you, this world would be deserted.¹

These are the words with which I was first introduced to the Prophet in my childhood; not as a historical figure who lived some 1,400 years ago, but as the best of creation, the most honoured among all the prophets, and the source of all beauty. He featured prominently in the prayers I learnt and the stories I heard. It was his example that was used to teach me what it meant to be good and virtuous. In times of happiness, it was his generosity and magnanimity that was remembered, and in difficult times, it was his patience and fortitude from which I was taught to seek solace. For as far back as I can remember, the Prophet has always been a living presence in my life and I learnt to love him dearly. Over the years, as I read more about him – his life, teachings, and humanity – my devotion and affection for him has grown even stronger.

So, in September 2005, when a Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, published a number of caricatures of Prophet Muhammad, I was shocked and deeply hurt. Although committed to democratic principles, including the right to free speech, when I saw those despicable cartoons, I wondered if such depictions that injure the sentiments of many millions, have any place in a civilised society. After all, freedom of

speech is not an absolute right and all rights come with corresponding responsibilities.

While many Muslims object to any depiction of the Prophet, some communities in Iran, Turkey, and elsewhere – both Shi'i and Sunni – have no issue with images that are respectful and reflective of the artist's devotion. This is particularly true of Shia Muslims in Iran where, until recently, one could purchase postcards and even carpets with images of the Prophet.² In 2008, the Tehran Municipality even commissioned a large mural depicting the Prophet's *mi'raj* displayed on a major thoroughfare.³ Occasionally, such images also appear in Sunni contexts, such as the wall mural on Mohammed Mahmoud Street in Cairo, Egypt, that was painted during the protests of 2012, showing the Prophet on a horse (albeit his face is turned away).⁴

Historically, there are literally hundreds of images of the Prophet drawn by Muslims, particularly during the 13th–17th centuries, primarily as part of works created for prominent Safavid, Ilkhanid, Timurid, and Ottoman Muslim rulers,⁵ and usually to illustrate events from the *sira* literature, early biographies of the Prophet. Some of these have his face veiled and others do not. Quite recently, I saw such images, drawn in traditional miniature style, on sale in the Grand Bazar in Istanbul.

As noted earlier, many Muslims find such depictions sacrilegious for a variety of reasons, although there is no specific prohibition of such imagery in the Qur'an. There are, however, *hadiths* that explicitly prohibit creating images of

living things,⁶ and yet we find that creation of such imagery, including depictions of humans, flourished among Muslims as early as the Umayyad (661–750)⁷ and Abbasid (750–1258) periods.⁸ But, that is a different debate as it has to do with how one interprets history and historical sources. What I was struggling with was an issue of fundamental human rights.

I discussed this question with a learned friend, a Muslim who was not disturbed by the caricatures. He said that we need to learn to ignore such instigations. He reminded me that, early in his mission, the Prophet was insulted and reviled by many, but he did not react violently. In fact, on many occasions, he was kind and forgiving. Remember the event of Ta'if, he asked. Yes, indeed, I did remember.

When the Prophet was about 50 years old, during what became known as the Year of Sorrow, his beloved wife Hazrat Khadijah al-Kubra and his uncle Hazrat Abu Talib passed away. With the passing of Hazrat Abu Talib, the Prophet had no tribal protection. In those days, this was akin to being a stateless person. Initially, another uncle offered to protect him, but withdrew his protection on learning that the Prophet believed that their mutual ancestors would be condemned to hell if they were idol worshippers.⁹ Without the support of his relatives, the Prophet was subjected to insults and persecution by all, including street urchins. We are told of an episode where a young street lout was emboldened to drop a pile of dust on the Prophet's head.¹⁰ Despondent, the Prophet left Mecca with a companion, Hazrat Zayd b. Harith, to seek aid and support in Ta'if, a town about 40 miles to the east.

They were received there by the three chiefs of the local tribes who refused to provide support to the Prophet's cause. Fearful that their courtesy to the Prophet and his companion might embroil them in conflict with the Meccans, they arranged to drive them out of the city by encouraging some ruffians and street kids to harass them. The mocking and jeering mob even threw rocks and stones at the Prophet and Zayd, leaving them injured and bleeding.¹¹ The Prophet is said to have bled so profusely that the soles of his feet got stuck to his sandal with congealed blood. Later, in a conversation with his beloved wife Hazrat Aisha, the Prophet recalled the deep distress he felt on that day. He had cried out to God and then saw in a cloud above him the archangel Gabriel (Jibra'il) with another angel. They said that God had observed his situation and, if he cursed the people of Ta'if, they would bury them in the valley. Despite his desperate condition, the Prophet declined, saying: 'I rather hope that God will produce from their descendants such persons as will worship God, the One, and will not ascribe partners to Him.'¹²

So, perhaps my friend was right. Maybe we should learn to ignore insults, even to our beloved Prophet, no matter how much it hurts us. But it feels unfair and unreasonable. We find in the sources that in his later life the Prophet did indeed punish those who insulted him. Usually, these were satirical poets who mocked him and his mission in their poems, which were part of war propaganda, claiming that the Qur'anic message was a scam being perpetrated by the Prophet. As such, these punishments could be seen as political rather

than religious in the context of a nascent Muslim community struggling for survival.¹³

But, that is not the case today. Unflattering images of the Prophet do not threaten the survival of Islam or Muslim societies. So, how might Muslims respond to such provocation? In the Qur'an, there are two verses that I find particularly helpful in this regard. In the first one, it is said: 'We are enough for you against all those who ridicule your message' (Q. 15:95). In other words, Muslims ought to trust God that any retribution that might be due to those who mock the Prophet will be delivered by God. In the second verse, God says: 'As He has already revealed to you [believers] in the Scripture, if you hear people denying and ridiculing God's revelation, do not sit with them unless they start to talk of other things, or else you yourselves will become like them . . .' (Q. 4:140). For me, the implications of these verses is that the best response is to ignore such provocation and to distance oneself from those who engage in such behaviour. Along the same lines, Mustafa Akyol writes in his *Islam Without Extremes*:

Muslims can boycott anti-Islamic rhetoric by refusing to join conversations, buy publications, or watch films and plays that mock the values of their faith. They can also organise peaceful protests. All of that is right, but trying to silence the anti-Islamic rhetoric with threats and attacks is not.¹⁴

I recognise that these are difficult issues, with no easy answers, and societies continue to grapple with them. In his

speech at the International Symposium at the University of Evora in February 2006, shortly after the publication of the offending caricatures of the Prophet, Mawlana Hazar Imam made the following comments that are instructive:

For I must believe that it is ignorance which explains the publishing of those caricatures which have brought such pain to Islamic peoples. I note that the Danish journal where the controversy originated acknowledged, in a recent letter of apology, that it had never realised the sensitivities involved. In this light, perhaps, the controversy can be described less as a clash of civilisations and more as a clash of ignorance. . . . But even to attribute the problem to ignorance is in no way to minimise its importance. In a pluralistic world, the consequences of ignorance can be profoundly damaging. Perhaps, too, it is ignorance which has allowed so many participants in this discussion to confuse liberty with license – implying that the sheer absence of restraint on human impulse can constitute a sufficient moral framework. This is not to say that governments should censor offensive speech. Nor does the answer lie in violent words or violent actions. But I am suggesting that freedom of expression is an incomplete value unless it is used honourably, and that the obligations of citizenship in any society should include a commitment to informed and responsible expression. . . . Ignorance, arrogance, insensitivity — these attitudes rank high among the great public enemies of our time. And the educational enterprise, at its best, can be an effective antidote to all of them.¹⁵

Nonetheless, it was very hard to swallow the insult of the Prophet. Muslims across the world were deeply hurt and a few reacted violently as well. People sometimes cannot understand why Muslims get so agitated every time something is said that seems insulting to the Prophet. Perhaps this is because they do not understand what the Prophet means to Muslims.

Remembering Prophet Muhammad

For Muslims, the Prophet is not just another historical personality worthy of reverence; belief in him as God's messenger is part of the Muslim profession of faith, or *shahada*, which states: 'There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God' (*la ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasul Allah*).



Figure 14. A procession in Sale, Morocco, to commemorate the birthday of Prophet Muhammad.

As the final messenger through whom God revealed the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad is the model for human behaviour that Muslims strive to emulate in their lives, because that is what is recommended in the Qur'an (Q. 33:21). For many, he is present spiritually even today and it is to him they turn as their protector and their hope for salvation, here and in the hereafter.

Across the world, Muslims recite poetry in praise of the Prophet, known as *na'at*, *madih*, or *mawlid*,¹⁶ which include touching expressions of affection and heart-rending pleas for succour. As a child, I remember listening to many such poems regularly. The verses that particularly moved me were those written by Purnam Allahabadi (d. 2009), which were beautifully recited in a *qawwali* by the famous Sabri brothers:

*Bhar do jholi meri ya Muhammad,
laut kar mei(n) na jau(n)ga khali*
Fill my lap (with my wishes) O Muhammad,
I shall not return from here empty handed

*Kuch navaso(n) ka sadqa ata ho,
dar peh aya hu(n) ban kar savali*
Grant me charity in the name of your grandsons,
I have come to your door as a supplicant

*Hashr mei(n) unko dekhe(n)ge jis dam,
ummati yeh kahe(n)ge khushi sey*
On the Day of Resurrection, the moment
his followers will see him, they will say happily

*Aa rahe hei(n) woh dekho Muhammad,
jin kay kandhey peh kamli hey kaali*
Look, there comes Muhammad,
with a black cloak on his shoulder.¹⁷

Perhaps the most famous poem in praise of the Prophet is the *Qasidat al-Burda* ('The Poem of the Cloak'), composed by the eminent 13th-century Sufi mystic of the Shadhili order, al-Busiri (d. 1295). It is said that al-Busiri wrote his epic poem after suffering an illness which paralysed part of his body. The poem was his way of seeking the Prophet's intercession in the hope that he would be healed. One night, al-Busiri had a dream where he saw the Prophet wipe his face and then place his cloak on him. The legend goes that al-Busiri woke up the next morning healed. Expressing his deep affection and devotion to the Prophet in the *Qasidat al-Burda*, he wrote:

Muhammad, the master of all who dwell in both the seen
and unseen worlds,

Of both corporeal species, men and jinn, of the two races,
Arab and Ajam [non-Arab].

Our Prophet, the commander of good and forbidding of evil;
No one was more just than he when he said 'yes' or 'no'.

He is the beloved of God whose intercession is hoped for
In the face of every dread and unexpected horror.

He called mankind to God, so whoever clings to him
Clings to a rope that will never be broken.¹⁸

Poems like these became an important way for many Muslim communities to honour the memory of the Prophet and express their veneration for him. To this day, such poems are recited with much zeal, and are particularly popular on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday.

Celebrating Milad al-Nabi

On 12 Rabi al-Awwal, the third month of the Muslim lunar calendar, many Muslims around the world mark the Prophet's birthday, widely known as *Mawlid* (literally meaning, 'birth') or *Milad al-Nabi* ('Birth of the Prophet'). In other parts of the world, it may be referred to as *Laylat al-mawlid*, *Mawlid al-nabi* or *Mawlid al-nabawi*. In any case, the festival is marked with similar expressions of affection and devotion for the beloved Prophet, seeking his *baraka* (blessing) for this life and his intercession (*shafa'a*) for the hereafter.

Most Muslims are probably unaware that the earliest records of formal celebrations of Milad al-Nabi date back to the Fatimid caliphate. The Fatimids also used to celebrate the birthdays of Hazrat Imam Ali, Hazrat Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, as well as the ruling Imam-caliph. Admittedly, these were not the kind of public celebrations we might see today; they were instead limited to the ruling caliph, their families and dignitaries. As part of the celebrations, a procession of dignitaries would attend the palace of the Imam-caliph where



Figure 15. A 17th-century Mughal painting depicting a night celebration of the Prophet's birthday.

multiple *khutbas* would be delivered. By the 13th century, the commemoration of the Prophet's birthday had become a public festival in Egypt and from there onwards spread across the Muslim world. Under the Ottomans, it was celebrated as an official festival from the early part of the 20th century.¹⁹

In contemporary times, Milad al-Nabi is celebrated as a national holiday in almost all Muslim-majority countries, usually with one or more days of public holiday. Often, special gatherings are held where numerous *na'ats* or *mawlid*s are recited, which include themes such as the creation by God of *Nur-i Muhammadi* ('the light of Muhammad') before all creation, descriptions of the illustrious ancestry of the Prophet, stories about the miraculous events leading to the Prophet's birth, as well as other events from his life that symbolise his greatness and noble character. For instance, in Ismaili *jamatkhanas* in various parts of the world, special *majalis* are held on the occasion, where *ginans* are recited, such as the following:

Jire bhaire sat svarag na kai(n) khuliya chhe duwar
Jis din nabi Muhammad janamiya
 O brother, the doors of the seven heavens were flung open
 The day Prophet Muhammad was born.

Jire bhaire te(n)tris karod devta-i mili kidho uchhrang
Nave khande me(n) shahji na nishan guniya
 O brother, countless great souls came together to rejoice
 The king was praised across the world.²⁰

In other locations, *qasidas* praising the Prophet are recited, such as:

Guzinam Qur'an astu din-i Muhammad

Hami(n) bud azira guzin-i Muhammad

I have chosen the Qur'an and the faith of Muhammad

Because they were the ones chosen by Muhammad.

Kalid-i beheshtu dalil-i naim

Hisar-i hasin ast din-i Muhammad

My key to paradise, my guide to delight

My impregnable fortress is the faith of Muhammad.

Celebrations in many parts of the world include the decoration of *masjids* and other buildings with streaming lights and torchlight processions, accompanied by much feasting and sometimes ecstatic dancing. To the delight of children, fairs are also organised. In special gatherings, *khutbas* extolling the virtues of the Prophet, as well as his intercessory potential, are delivered. For some Sufi communities, for instance the Tijani order in Senegal, Milad al-Nabi is commemorated with an annual gathering for members of their community to practice *dhikr* (remembrance of God), and recite the Qur'an.

There are some Muslims who believe that all this is *bid'a*, or innovation, not because they do not love the Prophet, but quite the contrary, it is precisely out of love for the Prophet that many seek to emulate his *sunna* without any change. They



Figure 16. The streets of Lahore decorated for Milad al-Nabi; the central decoration piece is a representation of the Prophet's sandal, a common symbol across the Muslim world.

highlight the fact that the Prophet himself never celebrated his own birthday and, as such, this is an innovation which Muslims are not entitled to celebrate. Further, they feel that the glorification of the Prophet and the narration of his miraculous qualities are tantamount to deification and, thus, inappropriate for Muslims. In response, one might remind them of the *fatwa* of al-Suyuti, a 15th-century Sunni Shafi'i jurist of the Shadili Sufi *tariqa*, also considered an authority for the Hanbali *madhhab*, who was convinced that even if the celebration of the Mawlid is an innovation, it is a good innovation (*bid'a hasana*).²¹

During a discussion, a professor provided an interesting analogy. He said that Islam is like a seed. Over time, it has been planted in different cultural soils by Muslims living across

different times and cultures, which has given birth to plants with varied qualities in the form of cultural expressions and interpretations of the Prophet's message. Even those who think that nothing has changed fail to recognise that there is much they do today as part of their religious practice that was not there in the time of the Prophet. However, the original seed is the same; it has now flowered in different forms. I thought that this was an interesting way to understand the diversity and evolution of Muslim traditions and interpretations. We started with a foundational structure, which itself was suffused with the customs and practices of 7th-century Arabia, and then have added to it our own adaptations according to the culture in which we have lived and the needs of our times and circumstances. We see this in architecture all the time. If a building does not go through adaptation, it can only become a monument or a decaying ruin; it cannot be a functional building if it is not adapted for the contemporary technological and environmental context.

As for the deification of the Prophet, that is just reflective of the poverty of language to express the ineffable qualities of the beloved. I have never met a Muslim – Sufi, Shia or Sunni – who worships the Prophet. I have met many who adore him as the *mahbub* (beloved) of God, as one permitted to intercede with God for his followers, as one who reflected divine virtues, and one who was more than just an ordinary human who delivered God's message. As Rumi put it, the Prophet was not just the cupbearer serving Divine Wisdom; he was the vessel through which this wisdom was offered to mankind.²²

In more narrative terms, the Sabri brothers sing the following in a *qawwali* to make a similar point:

Khayal aya rab ko ke dekhu(n) me(n) khud ko
 Once God thought that He might see Himself
To khud me se khud aik tasvir dhali
 So, He carved an image from Himself
Jo dekha to khud ho gaya us peh sheyda
 When He saw it He absolutely adored it
Woh tasvir apney muqabil sajali
 He kept that image across from Himself
Muraqqa kiya usko har har ada sey
 And beautified it from every angle
Rakkha nam uska Muhammad khuda ney
 Then God named it Muhammad.²³



Figure 17. A temporary sweet shop is set up outside the Mosque of Sayyidna Zaynab in Cairo for Milad al-Nabi celebrations.

The Prophet himself is known to have made suggestive statements that have educated the Muslim imagination of his spiritual status. For instance, he is believed to have said something to the effect that he was a prophet when Adam was between soul and body.²⁴ So, it is not the deification of the Prophet that is reflected in the *mawlid*s; rather it is the love of God that is manifested as the love of His beloved. This is one of the reasons why the early Muslims spent so much effort in gathering everything they could about the words and deeds of the Prophet so that they may emulate him. The challenge today is to understand and interpret the example of the Prophet in its proper context.²⁵

“ I became more than ever convinced that it was not the sword that won a place for Islam in those days in the scheme of life. It was the rigid simplicity, the utter self-effacement of the Prophet, the scrupulous regard for pledges, his intense devotion to his friends and followers, his intrepidity, his fearlessness, his absolute trust in God and in his own mission. These and not the sword carried everything before them and surmounted every obstacle. When I closed the second volume (of the Prophet's biography), I was sorry there was not more for me to read of that great life. ”

- Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Young India*, 1924

Some Muslims seek to implement the *sunna* of the Prophet by trying to mould their life to the way the Prophet lived, for instance, by keeping the same size of beard, wearing the same length of trousers, etc. But, I sincerely believe that to properly understand the Prophet and his message, his life must be viewed in his 7th-century Arab context. If we view it wearing 21st-century lenses, the view will be, at best, skewed.

Clearly, no Muslim can live a life exactly as it was lived in 7th-century Arabia. It would also be impossible to literally abide by everything that the Prophet said, or even what is said in the Qur'an. Take, for instance, some of the punishments prescribed in the Qur'an for specific crimes which are now considered to be inhumane, but which were part of the societal norms of its time. All of this has to be seen in its proper historical context so as to derive from it the implicit principles for contemporary application. The late Professor Fazlur Rahman, a scholar and philosopher of Islam who hailed from Pakistan, used to refer to this as the idea of a double movement: from the present to Qur'anic times and then back to the present. This was necessary he said because the Qur'an and the Prophet's teachings were related to a particular socio-historic context. This is precisely why Muslims have expended and continue to expend so much effort on the *Ulum al-Qur'an*, or Qur'anic sciences, which include the *Asbab al-nuzul* that seek to provide the context of the revelation. It also includes the *tafsir* tradition, which represents attempts by thousands of Muslim *mufasssirs* to understand and explain the Qur'anic message, sometimes verse by verse or even word by word.

Many years ago, while reading the Qur'an, I came across the following verses at the beginning of *Surah Abasa*:

He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him – for all you know, he might have grown in spirit, or taken note of something useful to him. For the self-satisfied one you go out of your way – though you are not to be blamed for his lack of spiritual growth – but from the one who has come to you full of eagerness and awe you allow yourself to be distracted. (Q. 80: 1–10)

Then, the Qur'anic verses move on to another subject. I wondered what this meant. Who was God speaking about? What was going on when these verses were revealed? And, most importantly, what does it mean for me today? So, I looked up the *asbab*, or context associated with this verse, and *tafsir*. Sources tell us that the Prophet was busy in discussion with some prominent tribal leaders in Mecca when he was disturbed by a blind man. In a *hadith*, however, it seems that there was only one other man there.²⁶ In any case, the Prophet appears to have frowned to express displeasure and the verses above were revealed to reproach him.²⁷ Another *tafsir* suggests that he asked the old man to wait for a moment while he completed his discussion.²⁸ Later, whenever that old man came to see him, the Prophet would spread his cloak for him saying, 'Greetings to him on whose account God reproached me!'.²⁹ Yet another source suggests that the Prophet could not have been the one who frowned given his noble character and, thus,

the reference must have been to another person in the group.³⁰ Clearly, there are multiple reports recorded about these verses. But there is one inescapable conclusion: God is reminding us of our responsibility to those who seek our assistance; even though the blind man was disruptive, God's admonishment cautions us not to ignore those who need assistance in favour of those who are well-established.

This is the kind of detective work one would have to do to begin to understand the Qur'anic message, which was intimately connected to the life of the Prophet. If one wishes to understand the Qur'an, it is imperative to learn about the life of the Prophet and his historical and cultural context. Perhaps this is why Muslims find every opportunity to narrate stories from the life of the Prophet or sayings attributed to him. It helps to remind us of the context as well as the life and personality of the Prophet, so we may understand his message better.

I remember listening to a *khutba* at a *mawlid* function where the *khatib* was trying to explain that the Prophet also had a great sense of humour. He narrated a *hadith* in which an elderly woman asked the Prophet to pray that she would be granted paradise. The Prophet responds that old women will not enter paradise. Hearing this, the lady appeared distressed. The Prophet chuckled and conveyed to her that no one will enter paradise in old age because God would restore their youth.³¹ Indeed, we have in the messenger of God a beautiful example to emulate.



Living Ismaili Traditions Series

The Living Ismaili Traditions series aims to inform and inspire an Ismaili readership with a balanced and inclusive understanding of topics pertinent to the Jamat. Written for members of the Ismaili community, this unique series explores the shared and diverse histories, identities, beliefs and practices of the Jamat worldwide. These introductory and engaging books invite Ismaili readers to celebrate the numerous living traditions that characterise their faith and values, and in turn encourage a greater understanding of the plurality of interpretations within the Jamat and the wider Muslim world.