

Haj: A pilgrimage, not a tour

It is incumbent upon Muslims to perform Haj, at least once in a lifetime, as long as they possess the means. As is clear from the following excerpts from the Quran and *Hadiths*, Haj is one important pillar among the five foundation pillars of Islam:

“Pilgrimage to the House is a duty to Allah for all who can make the Journey.” (3:97).

“The first House ever to be built for man was that at Mecca, a blessed place, a beacon for the nation.” (3:96)

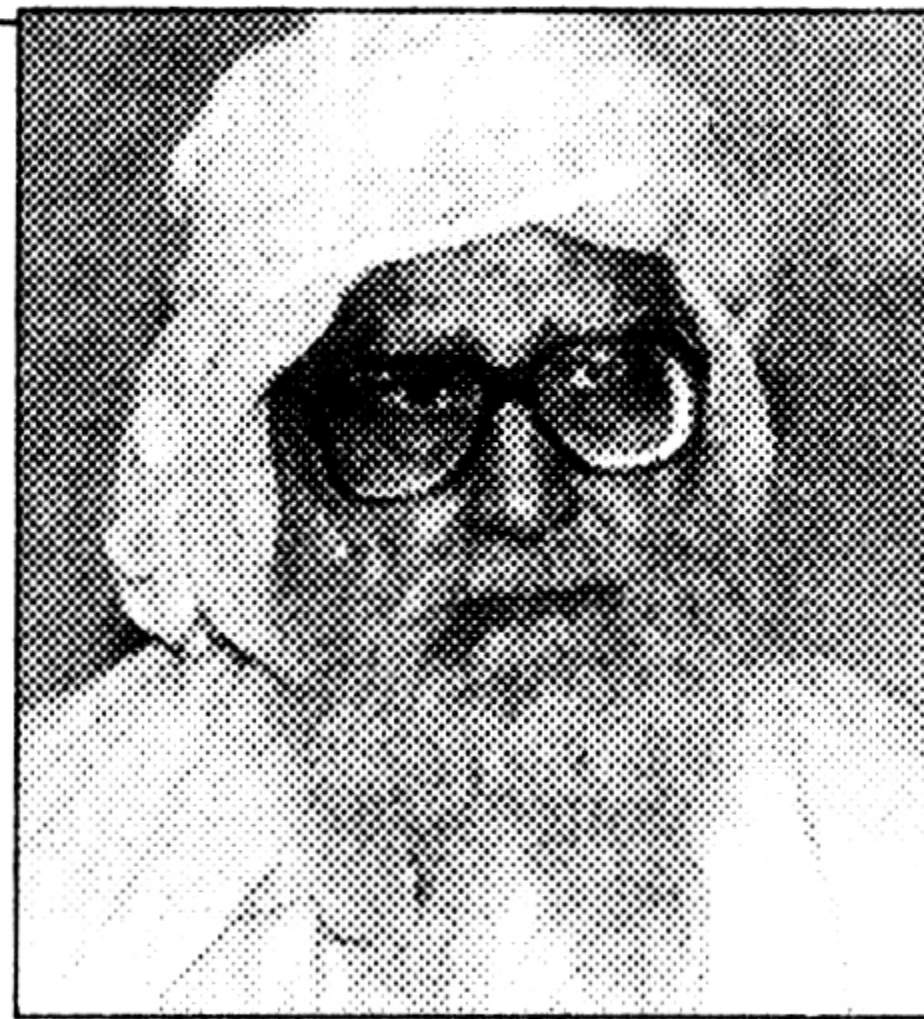
“There are five basic pillars of Islam,” said the Prophet Muhammad: “To bear testimony that there is no deity save Allah, and that Muhammad is His Prophet; to establish prayer and pay the poor-due; to make pilgrimage to the House and, fast during Ramadan.”

The root meaning of the word Haj is “to set out” or “to make pilgrimage.” Canonically, it has come to refer to a Muslim act of worship, performed annually, in which the worshipper circumambulates the House of God in Mecca, stays awhile in the plain of Arafat and performs other rites which together constitute Haj — the act of pilgrimage.

Haj is a comprehensive act of worship, involving both financial outlay and physical exertion. Both remembrance of God and sacrifice for His sake are part and parcel of Haj. Haj is an act of worship in which the spirit of all acts of worship has, in some way or another, been brought into play.

The sacred duties of Haj revolve around the House of God in Mecca. What does the House of God represent to a believer? It brings to life a whole prophetic tradition, stretching from Abraham to Muhammad. The House of God stands as a model of true faith in God, and submission to the Master of the House. “The Prophets gave up everything and followed the Lord,” is the message that rings out from the Lord’s House; “leave all and follow Him. They were obedient to His will; be you so also. They served His cause on Earth; serve Him until you

Horizons



Wahiduddin Khan

die, and you will prosper forever.”

The journey to Haj is a journey to God. It represents the ultimate closeness one can achieve to God while living in this world. Other acts of worship are ways of remembering God; Haj is a way of reaching Him. Generally we worship Him on an unseen level; in Haj we worship Him as if we saw Him face to face. When a pilgrim stands before the House of God it seems to him that he is standing before God Himself. He is then moved to revolve around the Lord’s House, like a butterfly encircling a flower, clinging to His doorstep as a slave begging for his master’s mercy.

To make Haj is to meet God. When the pilgrim reaches Meeqat, the border of the Sacred Territory, he is filled with awe of God; he feels that he is leaving his own world, and entering God’s. Now he is touching the Lord, revolving around Him, running towards Him, journeying on His behalf, making sacrifice in His name, smiting His enemies, praying to the Lord and seeing his prayer answered.

Among all Muslim acts of worship, Haj holds a prominent position. In one *hadith*, the Prophet called it the supreme act of worship. But it is not just the rites of pilgrimage that constitute this importance, it is the spirit in

which Haj is performed. Let us put this another way and say that it is not merely a matter of going to Mecca and returning. There is much more to Haj than that. Haj has been prescribed so that it may inspire us with new religious fervour. To return from Haj with one’s faith in God strengthened and rekindled — that is the hallmark of a true pilgrim.

The House of God in Mecca is one of God’s signs on earth. There, souls that have strayed from the Lord take comfort in Him once again; hearts which have become hard as stone are brought low before Almighty God; eyes which have lost their vision are filled with divine radiance. But these blessings of Haj are only for those who come prepared for them. Otherwise Haj will be just a tour, a visit which leaves no lasting impression upon the tourist.

“Haj is to stand in the plain of Arafat.” These words of the Prophet Muhammad illustrate the importance of sojourning in the place. The plain of Arafat, in which pilgrims spend one day, presents a picture of the arena of Judgement Day. Host upon host of God’s servants flock in from all sides to witness the spectacle. And what a spectacle! All are dressed in similar, simple attire. There is nothing to single out any person. All are reciting the same words: “Here we are at Your service, Lord.” How can one who witnesses this spectacle but call to mind the like of this verse of the Quran:

“When the Trumpet is blown, and behold, from the graves they rush forth to their Lord.” (36:51).

The pilgrims gather on the plain of Arafat in order to recall the time when they will gather on the plain of the last day. What they will experience in practice in the next world, they conjure up visions of in this world.

For all these reasons, Haj reigns supreme among all acts of devotion. Like the Sacred Mosque in Mecca has a station above all other mosques, so the worship that is performed there — as part of the pilgrimage — stand head and shoulders above all other acts of devotion.