

Dedicated to my guides

Ziaul Huq Qutubuddin.

Shah Abdul Hannan.

Preface

I have a lasting feeling that if a writer visits the Kaaba - House of Allah and perform hajj it becomes an incumbent duty on his or her part to write a piece on the amazing experience and the lessons gained from the pilgrimage. Otherwise his or her life as a writer remains incomplete. I, therefore, made an attempt to record my experience, the enduring impression the Kaaba made on my mind, being a researcher and writer myself. I believe it will encourage other visitors to the Kaaba to write his or her feelings about the magnificent Kaaba, the experience of hajj and on the wonderful visit to Madinah al Munawwarah. Such write-ups will be meaningful to understand the spirit of hajj.

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I started to write this piece on November 19, 2014 and could finish it by the Kindness Allah on April 27, 2015. All Praise is due to Allah the Most Merciful.

Shah Abdul Halim

Hajj

Journey of a Lifetime

Shah Abdul Halim

Talbia or the monotheistic hymn: Labbayka allahuma labbayk. labbayka la sharika laka labbayk. inna al hamda wa an-ni'mata laka wa l-mulk. la sharika lak. Here I stand before You O Allah. Here I stand. Here I stand. You have no partner. Here I stand Verily all praises blessings are Yours and power belongs to You. You have no partner

Significance: Ihram points to death. Tawaf aligns you with Allah. Sa'i is effort, search and pains. Zamzam is life and fulfillment. 'Arafah lets us anticipate the Day of Resurrection. Muzdalifah symbolizes darkness before the new dawn. Mina, with slaughter and removal of ihram, is new life. Stoning in Mina is the life-long struggle against evil. But the center of life is Allah.

Blessings: The haji intercedes for four hundred of his relatives and as sinless as on the day his mother gave birth to him ... Between one umra and another, all sins are redeemed, while the reward for blessed hajj is nothing short of paradise - Prophet Muhammad peace and blessings be upon him.

I had a life-long desire to visit the Kaaba, the House of Allah in Makkah. Indeed, the longing to be in the Kaaba was very intense. I dreamt several times that I was in the area of the Kaaba and running to touch the Kaaba but every time I woke up from dream before I could touch the Kaaba or the Kiswa, it's covering. Every time I woke up from the dream with a feeling of utter helplessness. Completely unsatisfied and frustrated, I wondered why I could not touch the Kaaba in the dream, what is the deficiency in me for which I could not reach up to the Kaaba. I thought maybe I shall not be able to perform hajj for something lacking in me.

But ultimately the opportunity came. By the Grace of Allah it became possible for me (I am 68 years) and my wife (60 years) to perform hajj for the Infinite Love and Mercy of Allah towards us - a joyous occasion, full of happiness. I affirm that nobody can visit the Kaaba, the House of Allah, unless the Owner of the House extends an invitation. Our brothers in Saudi Arabia, therefore, always affirm and reiterate that hajjis are the guests of Allah.

We left Dhaka for Jeddah on September 29, 2014 by a special flight of Saudi Arabian Airlines. We had to face immense difficulties in boarding the aircraft as arrangements were not made like rest of the normal flights in which passengers are seated in their earmarked seats although the boarding card issued by the airline had mentioned the seat number. This created a pandemonium as most of the hajjis were on their first ever flight on an aircraft.

The other problem arising from not requiring a passenger to sit in the marked seat was that husband and wife became separated and had to take seat at different places. It created unnecessary commotion. In the original sitting plan arrangements were made in which a couple would sit together. But as it did not work, aspiring male hajjis were alarmed to see others' wives sitting beside them. I hope Saudi Arabian Airlines, nay all airlines operating hajj flights next year, will take this fact into notice to avoid any untoward incident and misunderstanding. However, the behavior of the airline crew in every respect was excellent.

Saudi Arabian Airlines was late by approximately three hours and we left Dhaka for Jeddah, the most important flight of our life, at around 9-30 p.m. Bangladesh Standard Time. We reached Jeddah by SV 5107 at around 1 a.m. Saudi Arabian Standard Time on September 30, 2014. It took almost four hours to complete the immigration and other formalities at the Jeddah airport. We left Jeddah for Makkah by bus at around 5 in the morning and reached the rest house Burz al Ziwar at Al Azizia, which is approximately 14 kilometers off the Bait al Haram Makkah, around 9 a.m.

On the way the bus stopped at several places possibly to meet officials of the muttawiff, meaning the guide. Before leaving Jeddah for Makkah we were lined up at the airport and our passports were checked several times, which is a very unusual practice according to international standard. Since all passengers of the flight were Bengali speaking, authorities at Jeddah airport engaged interpreters who could speak Bengali to make things easy. Officials of the muttawiff took our passports into their custody and instead gave us hajj passes.

On the very first opportunity we left the rest house Burz al Ziwar at 7 p. m. in the evening for the magnificent Bait al Haram Makkah to perform umra, tawaf - circumambulating the Kaaba followed by sa'i - walking and jogging between Safa and Marwa hills, back and forth seven times.

I was really spellbound and much excited seeing the Kaaba - the House of Allah. Emotions overtook me, tears rolled down my cheeks and in no time I started tawaf - circumambulating the Kaaba seeking Mercy of Allah, with my wife beside me. It took me to another exalted level of spirituality.

Hajj is a profoundly elevating amazing experience. Those who perform hajj, in fact, answer the call of Prophet Ibrahim peace be upon him. According to Traditions, when the Kaaba was being built, Allah commanded Prophet Ibrahim to call people to the hajj [Quran 22: 27]. He said, my Lord, my voice will not reach them. Allah answered: You call. Reaching is My responsibility. Therefore, everyone who has performed hajj to this day is one of those who answered the call of Prophet Ibrahim.

The hajjis fulfill the prophecy and promise made to Prophet Ibrahim by Allah that people would flock to the sanctuary of the Kaaba to perform hajj [Quran 22: 27]. The fact that people come here from all over the world symbolizes their devotion to Allah. The journey made by the hajjis is also a reminder that life is a journey and it, too, has a destiny, which is, to return to Allah and account for life on the Earth.

There is no place in the Earth as adored, venerated, cherished and valued, as central or as holy as Makkah. By any objective standard, the valley is the most momentous, distinguished, illustrious and celebrated place on Earth.

Kaaba: It is 15.24 meter [fifty feet] high edifice. Its northeast wall and southwestern mate is 12.19 meter [forty feet] long, and the two “side” walls are 1.52 meter [five feet] shorter. The edifice is built at the express command of Allah by Prophet Ibrahim peace be upon him and his son Prophet Ismail peace be upon him. Prophet Ibrahim built this house not for himself but in devotion to Allah.

Hajj can be traced back to the first man Prophet Adam peace be upon him. According to Traditions, the first person to make pilgrimage to the House was Prophet Adam and, therefore, it is said that it was Adam who initially built this House. Prophet Muhammad peace and blessings be upon him restored many centuries later the intents and practices initiated by Prophet Ibrahim as ordained by Allah. For the Muslims it was Prophet Ibrahim who transformed those rites into authentic Muslim culture. Whatever modifications Prophet Muhammad carried out, the Tradition asserts, represented restoration of the original form of the hajj. Thus Prophet Muhammad did no more than restore the sanctuary built by Prophet Ibrahim to its original purpose.

Prophet Ibrahim and Prophet Ismail raised the foundation of the Kaaba [Quran 2: 127], one of the most momentous and celebrated assignments in the history of mankind, and prayed to Allah: Our Lord send amongst them a Messenger of their own Who shall rehearse Thy Signs to them and instruct them in scripture and wisdom and purify them for Thou art the Exalted in Might the Wise [Quran 2: 129], and thereby laid the spiritual foundation of Prophet Muhammad’s mission by invoking Allah to send him and by (re)building the Kaaba, epicenter and nucleus of Muhammad’s prophet-hood and his overall spiritual and civilizational legacy.

Kaaba is a cube with walls crudely built from rough stones and completely empty inside – a symbol of perfection of Allah – rendered in utter visual simplicity. It is quite unlike the very intricate representation of Gothic- supernatural or Rococo - decorative styles. Kaaba is covered with Kiswa, a black velvet cloth which has verses of the Quran woven into its fabric, some of it with gold embroidery. During the hajj the cloth is pulled up, lest nobody believes that this House of Allah is, or pretends to be, a work of art or something mysterious.

Kaaba stands as if in a quiet island in the middle of a vast quadrangle of the mosque, much quieter than any other work of architecture anywhere in the world. It would appear that he who first built the Kaaba – for since the time of Prophet Ibrahim the original structure has been rebuilt several times in the same shape – wanted to create a parable of man’s humility before Allah. The builder knew that no beauty of architectural rhythm and no perfection of line, however great, could ever do justice to the idea of Allah, and so he confined himself to the simplest three-dimensional form imaginable – a cube of stone.

In Muslim countries mosques in the hands of great artists had created highly inspired works of art. The mosque of Istanbul, the Sulaymaniyya, the Bayazid mosque; and those of Asia Minor and the Safavid mosque in Iran and the mosque in Samarkand are splendid sights even to this day. These are, however, no match to the Kaaba.

In the Kaaba the hand of the builder had come so close to his religious conception. In the utter simplicity of a cube, in complete renunciation of all beauty of line and form, it speaks of this thought: Whatever beauty man may be able to create with his or her hands, it will be only a conceit to deem it worthy of Allah; therefore, the simplest thing

that man can conceive is the greatest that he or she can do to express the glory of Allah. Even the size of the Kaaba speaks of human renunciation and self-surrenders; the proud modesty of this little structure has no comparison to anything on the Earth.

Muhammad Asad, widely acclaimed commentator of the Quran for his masterpiece 'The Message of the Quran', and who had the privilege of entering inside the Kaaba wrote: "The interior, usually closed, is very simple: a marble floor with a few carpets and lamps of bronze and silver hanging from a roof that is supported by heavy wooden beams" [Muhammad Asad, The Road to Mecca, Dar Al-Andalus, Gibraltar, U. K., 1981, p - 368].

There is also a story in circulation that Prophet Muhammad after the fath Makkah, conquest of Makkah, did not touch the images of Prophet Ibrahim peace be upon him, Prophet Isa peace be upon him and Maryam peace be upon her that were inside the Kaaba although he demolished all other icons, idols, statues, figures, images, paintings and pictures [Martin Lings, Muhammad: His Life Based on Earliest Sources, The Islamic Texts Society, U. K., 1991, p - 302]. This story has no validity [Muhammad Husein Haykal, The Life of Muhammad, Shorouk International, Beirut, 1983, p - 409]. One of the diplomats of Bangladesh who was posted in Riyadh in Bangladesh Embassy and who entered inside the Kaaba, while representing the Government of Bangladesh in the annual washing ceremony of the Kaaba, told this writer, in reply to a question, that he did not find any idol, image, figure, painting or picture inside the Kaaba. On the day of the conquest of Makkah the Prophet destroyed 360 idols in and around the Kaaba and erased all the pictures and when he entered the Kaaba, none of the pictures were there [Adil Salahi, Muhammad: Man and Prophet, Islamic Foundation, U.K., 2002, p - 632]. Then he kept reciting: wa qul ja al haqqu wa zahaqal batil innal batila kana zahuqa Say the truth is triumphant, falsehood is vanquished. Falsehood will always be vanquished [Quran 17: 81].

Actually, this interior has no special significance of its own, for the sanctity of the Kaaba applies to the whole building, which is the qiblah- that is, the direction of prayer- for the entire world. It is toward this symbol of Oneness of Allah that hundreds of millions of Muslims of the world turn their faces in prayer five times a day.

Kaaba, the most sacred House of Allah is unique in many respects. It is distinct as it is the qiblah for Muslims, the focal point to which Muslims everywhere need to turn to offer prayers. Muslims from all over the world turn their faces toward this House while performing salah, while kneeling and prostrating in prayer. Muslims nowhere in the world do anything that may be disrespectful to the Kaaba. They do not discharge urine or stool towards the direction of the Kaaba to uphold its sanctity. Some Muslims even do not respond to their calls of nature in the sacred enclosure. Some even refuse to spit in the direction of the Kaaba. No other place in the world throughout the ages has achieved the yearning, affection, respect and sanctification that the sacred Kaaba has acquired.

A trust, hope and yearning prevail in the heart of every Muslim to visit the Kaaba. They cherish the dream to circumambulate the House, kiss al Hajr al Aswad - the Black Stone, sweep their hands across Yamany Corner and did pause while pressing their breasts against its stonework. They want to fondly brush their cheeks across it, shed tears of supplication on its walls and caress its stone and drapes with love and affection. They yearn to express devotion by walking in its courtyard, slake their thirst at Zamzam and

call the blessings of Allah sincerely to pour upon them and upon those whom they love. This is how they seek to attain the supreme triumph.

Devotees are walking, kneeling, prostrating and are all time busy in supplication, days and nights, mornings and evenings, be it hot or cold a never ending throng around the Kaaba. Notwithstanding the simplicity of the Kaaba, hajis experience a great feeling of excitement when near the Kaaba, feel great attachment and closeness to Prophet Ibrahim while remaining very careful to uphold its sanctity.

Kaaba is the goal of longing for so many millions of people for so many centuries. To reach this goal, countless hajis have made great sacrifices throughout the ages - many have died on the way; others have reached it only after great hardships. The total hajj experience to some is often an arduous, frightening and painful one. To all of them reaching this small building – House of Allah - was the ultimate desire of their life and reaching it meant fulfillment.

Kiswa: Because of the pre-eminent position of the Kaaba in the hearts of Muslims there has been competition to clad it and care for it. The first person to cover the Kaaba after Prophet Ismail was King of Himyer, Tubba Abu Karb Asad, 225 years prior to hijra, migration of Prophet Muhammad to Madinah. He was the first to make a door and a key for the Kaaba.

Saudi Arabian artisans have been making the Kiswa, the covering cloth of the Kaaba since 1927 using the state of the art technology. To this day it remains largely hand-made so that the highest degree of perfection and sophistication can be attained. The black Kiswa is woven from pure silk and on it embroidered are the words: La ilaha illa Allah Muhammad rasul Allah. Allah Jalla Jalaluhu. Subhana Allah wa Hamdu. Subhana Allah al Azim. There is no ilah - deity but Allah. Muhammad is the prophet of Allah. Great be the Splendor of Allah. Praise be to Allah and Grace to Him. Praise be to Allah Almighty.

The total size of the Kiswa is 2650 square meters. Its surface is 658 square meters. The Kiswa consists of 47 rectangular pieces, the length of each piece being 14 meters of 95 centimeters width. The perimeter of the girdle round the Kaaba is 45 meters, with a width of 95 centimeters. It is made of 670 kilograms of white silk, which is later dyed. The girdle and the drape to the door of the Kaaba are made up of 120 kilograms of gold-plated silver wire. Kaaba is covered twice a year.

Kaaba Door: The door of the Kaaba is about 2.13 meter [seven feet] above the courtyard level. It is more than 3 meters high and its width is about 2 meters. It has a thickness of about half a meter and has two leaves. The decoration and inscriptions of the interior door of the Kaaba called Bab ul-Tawba are similar to the exterior door and it is 70 centimeters wide and 230 centimeters high. It is made of Makamoungh wood as the outside door with a thickness less than 7 centimeters. Both the outside and the inside doors of the Kaaba have been made in Makkah from pure gold of 286 kilograms, 99.9% grade. On the door of the Kaaba verses of the Quran have been inscribed in the thuluth script.

Journey: The spiritual journey of hajj requires a total and absolute commitment on the part of aspirant hajis that goes beyond heart and mind, demanding the devotion of the entire person, body and soul, his or her entire being from top to bottom. The hallmark of

hajj is simplicity and humility before Allah. The purpose of hajj is the glorification of Allah alone. The spiritual, moral and social significance of hajj is to make Muslims submissive and obedient to Allah, remember death, resurrection and accountability. The socio-political significance of hajj is that it strengthens the feeling of brotherhood. The hajis dress in ihram, two white pieces of cloth that breaks national chauvinism and sets aside the distinction of race, status and wealth. It is like a congress of Muslims from all over the world that opens up the opportunity to discuss any issue for mutual benefits.

Earlier, before leaving Bangladesh, I draped ihram, two white pieces of unsewn strips of cloth slung around hips and shoulders with the intention to perform umra. Thus attired I formally entered the state of hajj.

However, I overcame my initial awe and as time passed my reaction became deeper. I shall explain this in a later part of this book.

The six-day [8 Dhu al-Hajja to 13 Dhu al-Hajja] hajj rituals started on October 2, 2014 and we stayed in Mina tent followed by 'Arafah tent, under Muzdalifah open sky and performed hurling of pebbles to jamarat - pillars symbolizing shaytaan, sacrificed lamb, shaved our head, made tawaf, circumambulating the Kaaba and sa'i, walking and jogging between Safa and Marwa hills - performed all these in an order of sequence. During the six-day of hajj the muttawiff provided us transport only on two occasions, for going to Mina tent and 'Arafah tent, thus leaving us to face unimaginable problems.

The first problem was that while going to Muzdalifah we had to walk and in the hurry I fell upside down, on the ground when someone touched my two stripped traditional unsewn sandal from behind.

The second problem we faced for not providing transport by muttawiff was that women hajis of the group became sick due to long walk.

The third problem for not providing transport by the muttawiff was that we frequently lost the route and moved hither and thither, as a result the women hajis became further weak.

The fourth problem was that in the absence of transport by the muttawiff, when we hired a transport we were cheated by the driver as is the usual practice of the drivers everywhere. We hired a microbus from the Kaaba to Mina tent. The microbus was stopped by the police at an intersection for not having the route permit and we had to get down from the transport. Now we faced a serious problem. We did not know the road to Mina tent. The Saudi Arabian police asked a public transport - a bus to take us to Mina tent. After leaving the spot the reluctant bus driver dropped us on the road. We were on the road and we did not know the way to Mina tent.

The dictionary meaning of muttawiff is one who guides hajis on tawaf. During the 36-day stay in Makkah and Madinah we never saw muttawiff Abdullah H. Muhammad Kazim. We felt his presence when his officials received us at Jeddah; took our passports and instead gave us hajj passes. We felt his presence when his officials took us to Mina tent, 'Arafah tent, to Madinah and finally to Jeddah for departure, back to Bangladesh.

Significance of ihram: As I mentioned earlier ihram points to death. The two white pieces of unsewn strips of cloth slung around hips and shoulders remind us that one day

we have to leave this alluring world and face Allah, our Creator. There is no meaning of the so-called earthly achievements and no value of glamorous life.

The outfit of ihram symbolizes a state of purity, which also emphasizes mankind's unity regardless of social status or nationality. The attire of the hajis not only symbolizes everybody's equality before Allah, but also evokes the thought of the Day of Judgment. The two white pieces of cloth of ihram remind us that we shall be buried after death in this state, rich or poor, and there is no difference in this ritual and all human beings are equal. Ihram symbolizes coffin cloth. There is no stitching of the cloth of burial and the ihram cloth. The hajis in ihram attire walk, as if like funeral prayer, towards the life Hereafter.

In Mina and 'Arafah the vast sea of hajis looks like the resurrected souls draped in the burial shrouds. Clothes are a symbol of individuality, ego, power, wealth and authority. The ihram-cloth destroys all individuality and ego in men and establishes the truth that men are basically equal, for rich or poor, they dress in the same cloth during hajj. Ihram also ends pride in men for power, wealth and authority.

The reason for this attire, consisting of two unsewn white pieces of cloth that goes back to an injunction of Prophet Muhammad, is that during hajj there should not be any feeling of strangeness between the faithful who flock together from all corners of the world to visit the House of Allah, no difference between races and nations, or between the rich and the poor or high and low, so that all may know that they are brethren, equal before Allah and man.

This is a real gathering of nations; but as everyone is wearing the all-leveling ihram the difference of origin was hardly noticeable and all the many races appeared to be almost like one.

Significance of tawaf: As I mentioned before, tawaf aligns with Allah every person circumambulating the Kaaba, an anticlockwise revolution in which people want the same, seek the same, do the same – and thus come to symbolize total submission. We are in His House and His guest. He takes care of us in every way. That means we become very close to Allah. Allah sees us although we don't see Him. The longing should be to see the countenance of Allah when one looks at the Kaaba but the earthly eyes have got no power to have a glimpse of the Divine Light, nor can man bear the Brilliance of His Light.

It is not easy to keep one's focus on the historic, symbolic and spiritual power of the Kaaba and to safeguard the spirituality behind one's action. Without that, the hajj could be reduced to an exercise of physical exertion. Tawaf is like prayer. Hajis pray earnestly to Allah for forgiveness, guidance, support and salvation in this world as also in the Hereafter while circling the Kaaba.

Kaaba is a symbol of Oneness of Allah; the hajis' bodily movement around it is a symbolic expression of human activity, implying that not only our thoughts and feelings - all that comprises in the term 'inner life' – but also our outward, active life, our doings and practical endeavors must have Allah as their center.

There is, therefore, no scope of moneythism, materialism, leading a corrupt individual and collective worldly life and doing anything in social, state or international sphere

that contradicts the spirit of the basic teachings of Islam and where Allah is not the center of all actions and events. As hajis walk on and on they become part of the circular stream, part of a movement in an orbit at this center of the universe.

Many people have reflected on the significance of making tawaf. Muhammad Asad made a wonderful parable: it is just as the atom has electrons and neutrons circling it, and the Sun is circled by all other planets, so also, the center of life of all Muslims should be the worship of Allah and seeking His pleasure, hence the circling of Kaaba [Muhammad Asad, quoted in Dr. Jamal Al Badawi, Islamic Teachings Course, Islamia Schools Trust, U. K. and The Islamic Information Foundation, Canada, Vol. 1, p - 121].

Incidentally the rotation of planets of our solar system has a striking similarity with tawaf which is anticlockwise. Almost everything in the solar system revolves and rotates counterclockwise. The Sun rotates counterclockwise. Mercury, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and Neptune - all rotate counterclockwise. Not only do all the rocky planets revolve counterclockwise around the Sun, and not only do all the gas giant planets revolve counterclockwise around the Sun, but something like 99% of the known asteroids, Kuiper belt objects and comets also revolve counterclockwise around the Sun. The Moon both orbits counterclockwise around Earth and rotates counterclockwise on its axis.

Significance of sa'i: As mentioned previously, sa'i signifies effort, search and pain. Sa'i between Safa and Marwa hills reminds us the trials and tribulations we will require to face in this worldly life if we are to uphold the Light of Allah, Noor Allah and establish His Order. It not only means constant efforts but also means we have to be ever active in finding out solutions to the contemporary problems.

We have to exercise our intellect in finding out solutions to the new problems, when they arise. We have to be vigilant and watchful about the possible difficulties we might have to face and have to be innovative while exercising ijihad [intellectual exercise or critical reading and reasoning or critical independent thinking or autonomous critical reasoning] and must also be ready to face the pains and agonies in the face of troubles and misfortunes. Walking and jogging between Safa and Marwa hills, back and forth, is the commemoration of the struggles of Hajar, her frantic search for water.

It teaches us the lasting lessons that without physical effort and sacrifice we would not be able to achieve the desired goal and shall never attain success thrive and flourish in this world - the question of amazing success does not arise. Providential discovery of water also teaches that Allah never abandons His truthful, honest and committed believers. Sa'i teaches us that in Islam there is no room to adopt fatalistic approach and sit down in the face of difficult situation. It also establishes the eternal principle that Islam rejects fatalism.

Following the footsteps of humble Hajar [believed to be of African descent], Muslims, men and women, irrespective of race and ethnicity, rich and poor are making sa'i to express their oneness with Hajar. It also reflects the profound respect Islam gives to women and motherhood - everyone follows the steps of this mother.

Significance of al Hajr al Aswad: The Black Stone - al Hajr al Aswad is about 1.22 meter [four feet] above from the courtyard of the Kaaba and is set in silver and lodged into one of the corners of the Kaaba. Muslims are required to kiss it, if there is an

opportunity, during tawaf, although it is not a part of the rites of hajj. Islam certainly abhors the worship of stones, be they white, gray, black, especially, since the ancient Arabs were well-known for worshipping stone idols. However there is a historical as well as initiatory reason for all the attention bestowed on the Hajr al Aswad.

One of the significance of touching or kissing the Hajr al Aswad is to show love and respect to Prophet Muhammad who himself installed that meteorite in its present location when the Kaaba was rebuilt. The tribal chiefs had a quarrelsome dispute when the Kaaba was rebuilt as to who was to have the honor of restoring the Hajr al Aswad who held it in high esteem. When the tribal chiefs failed to settle the dispute among themselves they accepted the arbitration of Prophet Muhammad who decided to put the Hajr al Aswad in a piece of cloth and asked the tribal chiefs to hold the cloth together and restore it in a way that each tribal chief would have a part in the operation. He then himself put it in its present position. Thus the dispute was resolved and peace was maintained. So when the hajis kiss it or point to the Hajr al Aswad with reverence, they do so following the practice of Prophet Muhammad, the wise peace maker.

The other significance of the Hajr al Aswad is that those who touch the stone today bridge the gap of time and establish as it were a physical connection with Prophet Muhammad. Muslims today, like billions before them, as a consequence of touching or kissing the Hajr al Aswad become part of a great spiritual chain. This is what Muslims of the present generation like the past generations are really interested in.

The Hajr al Aswad is not an idol or an image, Islam is totally opposed to such things. When Muslims touch, kiss or point to the Hajr al Aswad, they do not adore or worship it, they simply feel at one with Prophet Ibrahim as the father of monotheism and experience a kind of emotional attachment to this relic of his. As a relic it has no significance in itself, but Muslims cherish the Hajr al Aswad and kiss it as one kisses one's loved ones and children.

The Hajr al Aswad, which has been kissed by many generations of hajis, has been the cause of much misunderstanding among non-Muslims, who believe it to be a fetish [or a stone believed to have magical power or a material being regarded with reverence. Prof Shahed Ali translated the word as *vautic protik*] taken over by Prophet Muhammad as a concession to the pagan Makkans [Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, Dar Al-Andalus, Gibraltar, U. K., 1981, p - 368].

Nothing could be farther from truth. Just as the Kaaba is an object of reverence but not of worship, so is the Hajr al Aswad. It is revered as the only remnant of the original building of Prophet Ibrahim; and because lips of Prophet Muhammad had touched it on his hajjat al-wada', farewell pilgrimage.

So all hajis do the same ever since. Prophet Muhammad was well aware that all the later generations of the faithful would always follow his example; and when he kissed the stone he knew that on it the lips of the future hajis would forever meet the memory of his lips in the symbolic embrace he had offered, beyond time and beyond death, to his entire community. And the hajis, when they kiss the Hajr al Aswad, feel that they are embracing Prophet Muhammad and all other Muslims who have been here before them and those who will come after them.

The second caliph Umar bin Khattab when kissing the stone said: I know that you are merely a stone, incapable of any good or harm, and had it not been that I had seen Prophet Muhammad do that, I would not have touched you.

Interestingly, the hajis before beginning tawaf start with a supplication which specifically negates the association of any partner with Allah – Bismillah Allahuakbar – In the name of Allah. Allah is the Greatest or Allah Alone is Great or Allah is Great and none is above Him. This by itself negates any association of partnership with Allah.

Significance of Maqam-Ibrahim: It is roughly 0.61 meter [two feet] by 0.92 meter [three feet]. In verse 2:125 of the Quran the believers are urged to take Maqam-Ibrahim as a place of musalla prayer. Prophet Ibrahim stood on this stone while building the Kaaba. According to Tradition Prophet Muhammad said: When Prophet Ibrahim stood on this rock, it became soft and his feet sink into the rock which resulted in making the impression of his feet on the rock. That the stone became soft is a miracle and a Mercy of Allah for it facilitated the work of Prophet Ibrahim. It is also narrated that the rock miraculously continued to rise higher as the wall rose during the construction. This also made the work of Prophet Ibrahim easy.

After the tawaf the hajis are to offer two rakah salah at the Maqam-Ibrahim. Earlier Prophet Ibrahim while searching for Ever Living True Creator Allahu la ilaha illa huwal hayyul qayyum [Quran 2:255] submitted to Allah saying: *Inni wajjahtu wajhia lillazi fataras samawati wal arda hanifaw wa ma ana minal mushrikin* - for me, I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth and never shall I give partners to Allah [Quran 6:79]. Now this is the supplication Muslims utters throughout the world before the beginning of salah, kneeling and prostration.

By making the Maqam-Ibrahim a place of worship, Allah honored Prophet Ibrahim. The everlasting teaching and significance of Maqam-Ibrahim is that Allah always accepts the labor and sacrifice for His Cause by His servants [Quran 2:281. 2:286]. This is true not only in case of prophets but also true about the sacrifices made by the people of our time. Whoever struggles in the Cause of Allah he or she will be honored in this life and Hereafter - this is the eternal principle ordained by Allah as reflected in the case of construction of the Kaaba by Prophet Ibrahim standing on a rock which is now called Maqam-Ibrahim, the Station of Ibrahim.

Significance of hijr: In the northwestern face of the Kaaba, an area of special sanctity defined by a low semicircular wall – a crescent like free standing wall – is called hatim. The semicircular area is called hijr which is 8.46 meters long. Muslim Tradition identify it as the burial place of Prophet Ismail and Hajar. The hijr enclosure used to be a place of common assembly where political matters were discussed or people prayed or slept. It is said that Abdul Muttalib, grandfather of Prophet Muhammad, was inspired to discover the Zamzam fountain while sleeping here [The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah, English tr. A. Guillaume, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, p - 62]. The mother of the Prophet Muhammad had also a vision there of her son's greatness [Toufic Fahd, *La divination arabe*. Leiden: E. J. Brill. 1966, pp - 363-364 and Uri Rubin, "The Ka'ba, Aspects of its Ritual Functions and Position in pre-Islamic and early-Islamic Times". *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 8 (1986), p - 113, quoted in F. E. Peters, *The Hajj: The Muslim Pilgrimage to Mecca and the Holy Places*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1994, pp – 15-16].

Prophet Muhammad was visited by angel Jibril here before his celebrated night journey, israh - ascension to heaven where no human being had gone before, the purpose of which was to show some signs of Allah [Quran 17: 1], an act of unveiling that enabled Prophet Muhammad to see remote places and worlds in a brief moment and acquire solid and definite knowledge of kudrat – majesty, glory and power of Allah and what exists in the dimensions beyond our own – belief in unseen.

The purpose of israh is to show the realities of hidden world, first-hand knowledge of invisible so as to prepare Prophet Muhammad to invite people to believe in unseen. On this occasion Prophet Muhammad received from Allah a number of directives including salah – prayers are obligatory five times a day [Al-Bukhari, K. Managib al-Ansar, ‘Bab al-Miraj; K. al-Tawhid, Bab Kallama Musa Taklima’].

The greatest gift given on this miraculous journey - israh from hijr - was the gift of salah, one of the fundamentals and pillars of Islam. The importance is evident by the fact that Prophet Muhammad was called personally to the heavens and beyond to receive this injunction, whereas the other injunctions were given on Earth through Jibril.

In fact our salah – prayers - are meant to be a journey to the Divine Presence like the Prophet’s ascension: worship Allah as though you are seeing Him, and while you see Him not yet truly He sees you [An-Nawawi’s Forty Hadith, tr. Ezzedin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson Davies, The Holy Quran Publishing House, Damascus, 1977, Hadith No, 2, pp - 28-31].

Other than the instruction of obligatory prayers of five times a day Prophet Muhammad during israh received from Allah guidelines that He will forgive every sin except shirk, associating partners with Allah, and the welcoming news of multiple rewards for good deeds – one reward for a good intention and ten rewards for a good deed, and no sin for bad intention and one sin for committing a sin thereby reducing and easing our burden.

The Prophet was shown a view of the paradise and the hell, a glimpse of what awaits in the Hereafter, punishment meted out to people for disobedience to Allah, committing adultery and fornication, illegally confiscating and usurping the property of orphans, slandering and backbiting and devouring riba - participating in interest and usury transaction and all other types of sin. Prophet Muhammad witnessed the magnitude of horrific torture which await those who perpetrate corruption on the Earth.

The Prophet Muhammad’s night journey, israh from hijr, happened when Allah invited Prophet Muhammad to Him, a wonderful journey as a reward when he remained steadfast in adversity. We have to remain steadfast in all hardships, difficulties and dangers; this is the lesson of israh, night journey of Prophet Muhammad from hijr.

Significance of Zamzam: It is a blessed water fountain. It is sacred for it is within the sacred enclosure of the Bait al Haram and also because it is the spring of Prophet Ismail, son of Prophet Ibrahim. It is not only unique but superior as its origin goes back to the days of Prophet Ibrahim and was miraculously discovered. As mentioned before, Zamzam is life and fulfillment. It is here that Hajar realized that Allah had not abandoned her and her son. She became confident of her personal survival and that of her son when she saw that water is gushing out of an unseen spring. Immediately thereafter, trade caravans started to visit the place. It became a center of civilization.

It is here that Allah founded a new center for people by spouting water without which no human being can survive. This is the place where subsequently the last divine Messenger came who invited humankind towards truth and justice and Allah made the Kaaba the new qiblah, the prayer direction for all. The water of legendary Zamzam is more precious than gold and hajis take back home some amount of this water to establish a physical and symbolic initiatory link with the sacred Makkah al Mukarramah. The incident is a lesson that Allah never forsakes His sincere servants when they are in difficulties.

Significance of Mina: As mentioned earlier, the most important thing is that it is in the Mina that after the slaughter of a lamb, hair cut or head shaving and removal of ihram the hajis enter a new life. The two pieces of white cloths symbolize death and hajis enter here in Mina to normal life practices and start usual life. Mina will always remind believers of the life after death and life in the world. Mina is a sacred and blessed place. The place is called Mina for the blood of the animals sacrificed in the name of Allah flows here. The place is sacred for Allah selected it for sacrificing animals. Allah honored the place by selecting it as a place of sacrifice.

Mina is also important for Allah chose this place to test the devotion of Prophet Ibrahim towards Him and again it is here that Allah through the incident of sacrifice prohibited, for all times to come, homicide, killing and sacrificing human beings at the altar of deities which the pagans used to do during jahiliyyah, the days of ignorance. But Mina could also be the center of Muslim unity and strength if all the assembled hajis say three million, could be assembled at one place instead of in scattered areas. I would request the government of Saudi Arabia to think over the matter.

Significance of 'Arafah: It is approximately 15 kilometers from Makkah. This is a sacred place. As I mentioned previously, 'Arafah reminds the hajis of the Day of Judgment. It is here that the assembled believers recount their deeds in the world and seek forgiveness from Allah, like the first man and first woman Adam and Eve, for their mistake, wrong doings, known and unknown, intentional and unintentional, big or small and take the vow that they will henceforth follow sirat al mustaqim [Quran 1:6], the straight path ordained by Allah and work for the good of humanity – inna allazina amanu wa amilu aswalihate [Quran 18: 30]. Hajis take a vow to work for good and forbid evil – ya'muruna bil ma'rufe wa yanhawna anil munkar [Quran 3: 104]. They promise to speak the truth, whatever are the consequences. They also promise that they will work to salvage people from oppressions rabbana akhrijna min hazi hil qariatiz zalim [Quran 4: 75].

Wuquf 'Arafah, staying in 'Arafah, is passing a wonderful day of contemplation, reflection, of prayers, and invaluable conversation. The Day of 'Arafah is nothing but dialogue with Him. Millions of hajis, on this day, wrapped in burial shrouds leaving everything behind exist only for Allah, embrace their mortality, and go on pleading and praying.

It is here at the Jabal al Rahmah - Mount of Mercy that Prophet Muhammad delivered his historic farewell sermon to the assembled hajis during the performance of his hajj in which he emphasized against the racial discrimination. Ever since, millions of people of all races, classes and nationalities have assembled in the valley of 'Arafah in humble submission to Allah. The rite of standing on 'Arafah reminds everyone of death and resurrection and the fact that all will stand before Allah on the Day of Judgment. 'Arafah

is important, for hajis offer Salat al Dhuhr and Salat al Asr, shortened and combined, at the time of Dhuhr with one adhan and two iqamas. 'Arafah is most unique for staying here is an obligatory part of hajj without which hajj will not be completed.

But stay in 'Arafah could be meaningful if assembled hajis could gather at one place and not on scattered hills. I would request the government of Saudi Arabia to specially look into the matter and study the possibility of creating an open space in 'Arafah where approximately three million hajis could offer congregational prayer as a matter of show of unity and strength of the Muslim ummah. Hope such rearrangements will not create any environmental imbalance.

Significance of Muzdalifah: It is 4 kilometers long and covers an area of 12.25 square kilometers. It is 8 kilometers from 'Arafah and 5 kilometers from Mina. It is a sacred place and unique for it is here that hajis combine Maghrib and Isha prayers during hajj. The spiritual significance of Muzdalifah is that all human beings, rich or poor, are equal and all pass together the night on the ground, under an open sky.

Muzdalifah also symbolizes entering the new phase of life, from the darkness of night to a new dawn. Here hajis have to lie down on sands for a night until the day breaks as if the soil is the bed and the sky is the roof. It reminds hajis that they will be in the burial chamber after death in almost the same state before resurrection for accounting their deeds in this world. Muzdalifah also reminds the hajis that Adam and Eve after getting forgiveness of Allah in 'Arafah stayed the night here.

But stay in Muzdalifah could likewise be more meaningful if the assembled hajis say three million, could be at one place and not scattered, to look like a vast human sea. Only then it would bear the real meaning and become a symbol of Muslim unity and strength. I would request the government of Saudi Arabia to study the possibility of creating such an open space here in Muzdalifah like Mina and 'Arafah.

Significance of the jamarat: Hurling pebbles to jamarat, pillars symbolizing shaytaan, at Mina valley signifies, as mentioned earlier, the lifelong struggle against evil. The intention is to symbolize the final rejection of evil in oneself and also in the world around us. The ritual symbolizes Prophet Ibrahim's stoning to devil.

The ritual, in actual, is renunciation of the evil in all its forms and a promise never to fall prey to the intrigues of shaytaan, the cursed. It should be understood that shaytaan is following us all the time and trying to misguide us. We have to be conscious of this. The symbolic stoning of the jamarat is significant in the sense that it only wants to remind us of this.

Significance of sacrifice: The objective of slaughter was not only to test the devotion of Prophet Ibrahim in obeying the command of Allah as it apparently seems. The real objective of this incident is to altogether close the door of human slaughter or *naro boli* for all times to come and therefore an angel substituted a ram for the human. In ancient times, the practice was to bury the female child and sacrifice humans at the altar of deities. In India the practice of *naro boli* still exists, although in a very limited scale.

It is because of this prohibition of human sacrifice by Islam that Caliph Umar bin al-Khattab and Amar bin al-Aas, Governor of Egypt refused to allow the old practice of sacrificing a beautiful young girl into the Nile river to make it flow considering it as a

practice of jahiliyyah, the days of ignorance. Rather Caliph Umar wrote a letter to the Nile river and asked it to flow if it is a servant of Allah and asked the Governor to drop the letter in the river which made it flow [Ibn Kathir, Al Bidaya wa an Nihaya].

Significance of shaving: Shaving the hair of head is significant in the sense that it destroys human pride and arrogance. In fact human ego is responsible for many of the ills prevailing in the world. This is one of the pivotal reasons for the absence of peace and tranquility in the family, social mistrust, turmoil and discord.

At the state level, the inter-party relations or government-opposition relations are also marred largely because of personal ego of leadership. International tensions that exist today are also largely the outcome of the desire to dominate from a feeling of superiority and haughtiness that is nothing but pride and arrogance. By completely shaving the hair of head, man bows before Allah in total submission. It shows that man is too small and Only Allah is Great.

In fact, Pride is the exclusive Sanctuary of Allah and no human soul should ever try to enter His Reserve. His is the Command and His is the Judgment and His is the Decision [Quran 28: 70]. Allah only intends to remind humankind by this action that He Alone is the Fountain of All Greatness and man has nothing to be proud of as he is made of clay [Quran 32:7], created from a sperm-drop [Quran 16:4] and created from a fluid despicable [Quran 77:20]. Do not walk proudly on the earth or walk not on the earth with conceit or arrogance or walk not on the earth with haughty self-conceit [Quran 17:37]. Allah loveth not the arrogant the vainglorious boaster [Quran 4:36, 16: 23, 31:18, 57: 23]. In fact shaytaan became proud and disobeyed Allah [Quran 2: 34. 7:11-12].

Significance of la sharika laka: Talbia, the monotheistic hymn of responding to the call of Allah, la sharika laka - there is no partner of Allah signifies self-surrender. When in Saudi Arabia or any other places in the Muslim world there are no idols like al lat, al uzza and manat, why do the hajis call in unison la sharika laka: O Allah You have no partner during talbia?

What is the inner significance of this chorus? What does it mean in our time, life and society? In fact the clear and uncompromising concept envisaged by la sharika laka - there is no partner of Allah is the foundation of Islamic belief and of the whole system of Islamic life. It defines the object of worship and submission for all, so that man submits to none other than Allah, Who Alone should be Worshipped, Obeyed and Revered.

It gives rise to the principle that Allah Alone should be the source of law and legislation for human life on this Earth. The laws and rules that people may lay down should derive from those that Allah has laid down. This would in turn imply that values and concepts originate with Allah and that all ethics, traditions and moral systems must be judged in relation to them.

Significance of laka wal-mulk: The statement laka wal-mulk that hajis chant during talbia, the monotheistic hymn of responding to the call of Allah, is very significant. As mentioned before I have translated the word mulk as power. Some other translators used the word sovereignty for mulk. Others have translated mulk as empire and even majesty. The dictionary meanings of mulk include: to have power or dominion over, who hath power to prevail, dominion, power, kingdom, one who is lord over, dominion,

kingdom, monarch [John Penrice, Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran, Curzon Press, London, New Reprint 1971, p - 140].

A king or monarch is an entity whose orders, wishes and desires are supreme, prevail over every other authority. Now if the kingdom belongs to Allah and He is the Malik, then law - the shariah - must be the supreme, otherwise there is no meaning of chanting laka wal-mulk.

But hajis continue to chant laka wal-mulk without realizing its significance. In most of the Muslim countries shariah is not supreme and the teachings of Islam are not binding upon the rulers. How then it matters that we chant that to Allah belongs the mulk, the empire or dominion or power or sovereignty over the worlds, living and non-living, matter and anti-matter, plant and animal kingdom, and cosmology.

Significance of hajjat al-wada': It was during the farewell pilgrimage that Prophet Muhammad finalized the rites of hajj. As explained earlier in the discussion on the significance of 'Arafah, I would add here a few more important aspects of the sermon of Prophet Muhammad during the farewell pilgrimage.

The Prophet banned all usury and interest transactions from that day which particularly the Jews used to practice. The usury and interest transaction is even today considered an instrument of exploitation and the pivotal reason for creating inequality between man and man leading to social imbalance. Here it may be mentioned that many centuries later Karl Marx also pointed out the negative impact of interest on human society.

The Prophet also banned the pagan practice of homicide, killing in retaliation which even today exists in some tribal societies. The Prophet taught the assembled hajis and through them to the entire mankind to treat women with love, compassion, respect and kindness. He emphasized maintaining sexual code and equality and brotherhood among the Muslims.

The most important event of the 'Arafah day is that after the sermon Prophet Muhammad in the afternoon recited to the people the revelation: This day I have perfected your religion for you, completed My Favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion [Quran 5: 3], an indication of the end of his mission.

The benefits of hajj: The hajj is the annual convention to establish peace in the world; during the performance of hajj the hajis cannot kill even a fly or a mosquito. The objectives of the hajj inter alia include that Muslims get in touch with one another and get better acquainted with the conditions prevailing in their countries and cooperate in worldly affairs. They must identify areas of reciprocal meaningful cooperation for mutual benefit including such areas as trade and commerce; and for advancement in such fields as science and technology; education and culture, moral and religious uplift, in a word the overall advancement of the ummah.

Recommendations: The government of Saudi Arabia may consider the recommendations mentioned hereunder to improve the conditions in the Masjid al Haram, its surroundings and in the overall management and administration of hajj.

Kaaba is surrounded by two large areas, both defined in the manner of a temenos and both marked by prohibited and privileged behavior within them. The one immediately

surrounding the Kaaba is called al Masjid al Haram - sacred shrine and is regarded by the Muslims as a mosque. A third and far larger area of Makkah city is defined by stone boundary markers - Ansab al Haram. The area extends roughly from al Hudaybiyya on the west to 'Arafah on the east, from al Jir' Ana Mosque on the north to Adat Labin on the south. This is the haram, the sacred territory exclusively reserved for the Muslims throughout the history.

Makkah is the nerve center of the Muslim world. What happens to this city has a profound effect on the Muslims elsewhere. The spiritual heart of Islam however has now become an ultramodern city. Consumerism is rampant with chain shops like KFC and others. Luxury shopping malls give it a show of commercial complex. It is hardly possible now to identify the ancient Makkah. The skyline is no longer dominated by the rocky outline of encircling peaks. The city is now surrounded by concrete structures. With 601 meter [1972 feet] Makkah Royal Clock Tower, skyscrapers including Hotel Hilton; Hotel Intercontinental and Hotel Oberoi cater to the superrich. The sacred city has lost its pristine character. It is likely going to be a city of multilane roads soon.

Minaret: As mentioned before, I overcame my initial thrill, excitement and wonder of seeing the Kaaba and as time passed my reaction became very deep. I became surprised to find that the Kaaba is surrounded by such buildings which are taller than the minaret of the Masjid al Haram. Here is no shariah violation but from a common sense point of view it does not look nice.

Gate: The principal gate of the Kaaba is Abdul Aziz gate. No doubt King Abdul Aziz was a great man. I have read the book 'Arabia Unfinished: A Portrait of Ibn Saud' by Mohammed Almana. But it does not look nice that the gate in the name of Prophet Muhammad is smaller in size than the Abdul Aziz gate. I understand the royal palace beside the Prophet Muhammad's gate is going to be demolished soon in the new renovation plan of the Bait al Haram. I hope the government of Saudi Arabia will take steps to decorate Prophet Muhammad gate as the principal gate of the Kaaba.

Kaaba surroundings: I believe that the area of Haram around the Kaaba should be totally open excepting the Masjid al Haram and after that one kilometer in every direction there should be a garden of flowers to look like jannah, the paradise. If one kilometer is not possible than half a kilometer may be earmarked. Hopefully this idea does not clash with shariah.

Whatever administrative and commercial buildings are needed should be under ground. Such arrangements should be made that people can enter the tawaf area, area of circumambulating the Kaaba or in the shaded gallery of the Kaaba for tawaf or the Masjid al Haram from beneath the ground.

The government of Saudi Arabia is spending billions of riyals annually for the renovation and beautification of the Bait al Haram. They can and I am sure they will do so in future also In Shaa Allah. Allah has endowed them with resources in fulfillment of the supplication of Prophet Ibrahim [Quran 14: 37].

The open complex of the Kaaba, in future arrangements, should have parasols like the Prophet Mosque in Madinah, a 15.24 meter [50 feet] sun-umbrella that was designed by a firm of German Muslim engineers which automatically opens and closes according to sunlight and always directs them towards the course of the Sun.

The number of cool-water-fans in the open complex of the Kaaba should be further increased to serve the people in prayers and movement. Bait al Haram should be decorated in such a way that all hajis, approximately three million, can pray together in and around the open complex. Only then the Kaaba will give a show of Muslim unity and strength.

Tawaf: During tawaf I observed that people enter the courtyard of the Kaaba for tawaf at the Hajr al Aswad (just beside Maqam-Ibrahim) and also leave the courtyard of the Kaaba after crossing Hajr al Aswad (just beside Maqam-Ibrahim) and offer two rakah salah at the Maqam-Ibrahim. This leads to unnecessary overcrowding at the Maqam-Ibrahim in the ground floor courtyard of the Kaaba.

But in the shaded gallery of tawaf, both on the first floor and the second floor, entry point and exit point of tawaf have been made separate to avoid unnecessary crowding. I think same arrangement may be made on the ground floor compound of the Kaaba.

I would request the government of Saudi Arabia to look into the matter and if there is no shariah restriction in the matter, this should also be repeated on the ground floor courtyard of the Kaaba like the first floor and the second floor shaded galleries.

I would also request our scholars to reexamine Texts to ascertain whether it is possible to perform tawaf in wide conveyers' belt. The government of Saudi Arabia is already studying the possibility of mechanized circumambulation, according to reports published in the Arab News of October 30, 2014.

The government of Saudi Arabia may also study the possibility of introducing mechanized system whereby the hajis will be able to hurl pebbles to jamarat from the conveyers' belt like the Saudi government plan of introducing mechanized circumambulation which they are studying.

Women using longer garment: The other thing I observed is that during tawaf some women use unnecessarily longer outer garment than required by shariah. The inner garment - the trousers used by women fulfill the shariah obligation of covering the lower part of the body. Because of the unnecessary length of the outer garment they touch the ground of the Kaaba which gets often stuck to the feet of the hajis from behind. It creates a situation in which ladies might fall down. I think the length of the outer garment should be slightly shorter. This is necessary to avoid possible accidents.

Niqab: I have also observed that some women use niqab to cover their face during hajj although shariah requires them to keep their face open. Such women are using caps with head flag label and then over the head flag label use niqab. Ignoring the maqasid - objectives of shariah - they are forwarding wrong alibi and arguing that their niqab is not touching their face and therefore they are not really covering the face.

Allowing male hajis to use shoes: On way to Muzdalifah this writer, while walking, fell upside down, when someone touched his two stripped traditional unsewn sandal from behind. This could be dangerous. There was not too much rush of people and a stampede was avoided.

The question I want to raise at this stage is whether or not it is possible to allow male hajis to use shoes like female hajis. I think we must look afresh into the shariah provisions in this respect, particularly when a hadith reports that man can use leather

stockings if he cannot find footwear, but it should be cut off so that it may be lower than the ankles [Sahih Bukhari 3.53].

Prayer in Maqam-Ibrahim: The other thing I want to mention here is that people are seen offering salah - in prostration just beside the Maqam-Ibrahim and the corridor beside. This creates unnecessary obstacles in tawaf. I think we have to make continuous efforts to educate aspiring hajis before they go for hajj.

They should be told that the teachings of Islam require that Muslims should not create obstacles on the way of others to perform religion. The agents who bring hajis to Saudi Arabia have a responsibility in this regard. Muslim governments and, in countries where Muslims are minorities, Islamic organizations have a responsibility in this respect. This is a difficult job but has to be accomplished by persistent and sincere efforts.

In verse 2:125 of the Quran believers are asked to take Maqam-Ibrahim as a place of prayer - musalla. A more literal translation of the verse is: Take some *place at or near* Maqam-Ibrahim as a place of prayer [Muhammad Mohar Ali, A Word for Word Meaning of the Quran, Jamiyat Ihyaa Minhaaj Al-Sunnah, Iphsich, 2003, Vol.1, Note 12, p - 59]. There is therefore no justification of crowding at Maqam-Ibrahim when the commandment of the Quran allows flexibility.

Khutba at al Masjid al Namirah: The speech, khutba delivered by Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al Asheikh at the Masjid al Namirah (110,000 sq. meters capacity) at 'Arafah, the spot from where Prophet Muhammad made his final sermon fourteen centuries ago during hajj, is very significant. It contains important message for the whole of Muslim ummah for the Grand Mufti discusses the prevailing world situation and what should be the response of the Muslims apart from urging the hajis to follow the pure tawheed, monotheism of Islam devoid of shirk – partnership with Allah, bid'ah – innovation and many other important issues affecting the Muslims.

In his live televised speech, the Grand Mufti cautioned the hajis against the conspiracy of the enemies of Islam and urged them to unify their ranks and work jointly. Al Asheikh highlighted the great role that media can play in serving the ummah and solving its problems in line with the teachings of Islam. He urged the media to stay away from polemics and instead focus on reforms. He warned against abuse of drugs and liquors. He also cautioned against militancy and extremism.

But in the absence of dissemination of the text of the speech the hajis are deprived of its benefit. I urge upon the government of Saudi Arabia to take appropriate steps for spreading the full text of the speech delivered by the Grand Mufti at the Masjid al Namirah. The prepared text should be translated into as many languages as possible and distributed not only among the hajis but the government of Saudi Arabia should take steps for publication of the full text in the newspapers worldwide, if necessary even as advertisement, through its Embassies.

The hajis at the 'Arafah may be handed over the printed copies of the speech in their respective languages and also the tapes be made available. The government of Saudi Arabia should take steps to broadcast the translated text of the speech of the Grand Mufti by using radio and television channels among the hajis who are in 'Arafah tent, camped according to nationalities. This is possible. The text of the speech of the Grand

Mufti in different languages should be uploaded and made available in the Internet - You Tube.

The other problem we faced during the six days of hajj is that we lost direction. This happened twice and there was none to help us. The police in Saudi Arabia are very much active in controlling the traffic and had little time to guide the people looking for a way to reach their respective destination.

Volunteers: It is high time that the government of Saudi Arabia should think whether to engage volunteers to help the hajjis who lose their way to reach their destination. The total number of hajjis this year was 2,085,238 of which foreign hajjis were 1,389,053 and Saudi domestic hajjis were 696,185.

A total of 102,900 hajjis from Bangladesh performed hajj this year. It means that out of 20 hajjis one was from Bangladesh. This being the scenario, the government of Saudi Arabia may also think of engaging Bengali speaking volunteers.

The number of hajjis from Pakistan was 1,89,000, India 1,51,500 and Bangladesh 1,02,900. Taken together, the total number of hajjis from these three countries stood at 4,43,400. Most of these hajjis understand Urdu. So Urdu speaking volunteers may also be engaged, as approximately out of 20 hajjis 4 are conversant with Urdu or in other words we can say out of 5 hajjis one could speak or understand Urdu.

In any case, volunteers must be such people who can speak English as a common language, for there are hajjis from other countries. For example, the highest number of hajjis this year came from Indonesia numbering 2,93,000.

Transport: As mentioned earlier during the six days of hajj the muttawiff provided us transport only on two occasions and this created unimaginable problems. My cousin Muhammad Mahbulul Huq who performed hajj this year along with his wife faced similar problems. Masum Khalili, Deputy Editor of the daily Naya Diganta who performed hajj along with his wife also faced similar problems.

In an article in the daily Naya Diganta on November 4, 2014 (see last paragraph of the article) Masum Khalili questioned why the hajjis from Bangladesh would face such problems and suffer when those from other countries are not facing similar problems. He raised a very pertinent question that when Saudi Arabian muttawiff (he mentioned mutawalli) is responsible for providing transport, why Saudi Arabian police and Saudi Arabian Ministry of Hajj had to intervene and send hajjis from many 'Arafah tents to Muzdalifah.

He called upon the Bangladesh Ministry of Hajj and Bangladesh Hajj Mission to solve the problem once for all by raising the issue with the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Hajj. The Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Bangladesh should translate into Arabic the last paragraph of this article as mentioned above so that the authorities in Riyadh may come to know of the sufferings of the hajjis from Bangladesh and their reaction.

This is important for making the performance of hajj smooth and maintaining and further strengthening the bilateral relations that exist between the two brotherly countries and also between the two peoples. It is important that for the negligence of some people the reputation of the government of Saudi Arabia is not jeopardized.

Historical relics: The government of Saudi Arabia had to demolish in the past many historical signs, relics and monuments when people started such practices as are against the pristine tawheed, monotheism of Islam and tantamount to bid'ah, adding new things to religious practice. The traditional religious authorities in Saudi Arabia have a disdain for worldly things as well as an abiding suspicion that reverence of things and people of the past might degenerate into shirk and idolatry.

It is also a fact that many historical relics' signs and institutions have been demolished in the way of expansion of many vital Islamic establishments and in the development process.

Others argue that the government and the people of Saudi Arabia have no perception of history and therefore have destroyed many relics. To my understanding, the pristine teachings of Islam and shariah are supreme and these always should have an upper hand.

Museum: But what the government of Saudi Arabia can do to solve this dilemma is to establish museums that will preserve, depict and portray the original position of the relics at the time of Prophet Muhammad and immediately thereafter. For example the house of Prophet Muhammad which is now a public library, beside it or as a part of the library replica of the Prophet's house and the surrounding may be made for public view and that should be explained to the visitors by such persons as are conversant with the English language.

Also, the replicas of the houses of the first caliph Abu Bakr Siddiq and the first Muslim who accepted the truth of the message Prophet Muhammad received ummul muminin mother of the believers Prophet's wife Khadijah Khuwaylid; Bilal Mosque; and the culturally and historically important sites that have been demolished for building Makkah Royal Clock Tower may be made and demonstrated in the museum.

Side by side, how the Kaaba and the Prophet Mosque have been expanded can be demonstrated in sequential order in such museums. Booklets and brochures in English illustrating the history of the expansion may also be distributed among the visitors.

Many war fields of the time of Prophet Muhammad, for example the battlefield of Uhud where Hamza, the uncle of Prophet Muhammad is buried and other battlefields are in pitiable condition due to the expansion process and because of the crowding of vendors to sell products to visitors in the area. Today Uhud is a drab barren place without any kind of helpful directions for interested visitors.

In those places museums may be established to preserve the history. Each museum should have a library that will explain the past. These museums will help the researchers. Such museums should have multi-lingual interpreters, who have a sense of history and knowledge of military science and can explain the past war scenario to the visitors. Each museum should have booklets, brochures, pamphlets and leaflets in English and other major languages explaining the historical background for distribution among the visitors. In Europe, Jews have established many museums on the holocaust although the number of visitors is only a few annually.

Unity and Brotherhood: The word hajj means effort. It is through the effort of travelling to Makkah, from one ritual site to another, finding and engaging with people

from different cultures, and soaking in the history of Islam that hajjis acquired in the past knowledge as well as spiritual fulfillment. Today, hajj is a packaged tour, where you move, tied to your group, from hotel to hotel, and seldom encounter people of different cultures and ethnicities. Drained of history and religious and cultural plurality, hajj seems to be no longer a once-in-a-life-time spiritual experience. It has been reduced to mere exercise in rituals and shopping.

Individual hajjis are seen exchanging pleasantries and greetings but at the community level it is perhaps absent. It is important that we remain vigilant to keep the inner spirit of hajj alive which is to make a Muslim devout, pious and sincere committed to strengthen the unity of the Muslims and also work for revival of the glory of Islam and Muslims. This will play a pivotal historical role to change the current state of affairs in the Muslim world.

Conference: The government of Saudi Arabia may use the opportunity to organize conferences, in the sideline of hajj, of important dignitaries who have come to perform hajj. The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) may also hold such conferences. The Saudi Arabian Universities in Makkah, Madinah and Jeddah may also hold seminars and symposiums during the month of Dhu al-Hajja. Various Islamic organizations like the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, Rabetat al Alam al Islami and such other organizations and Think Tanks may also organize seminars, symposiums and conferences to boost public awakening and make people ever vigilant about the interest of Islam and Muslims. The Ministry of Information and Saudi Arabian media, both print and electronic, may play a pivotal role in this regard.

Khadimul Haramine may stay full one month of Dhu al-Hajja in Makkah and make constant endeavors to cement the relationship between Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries and also work to bring different Muslim countries closer. He may host separate parties to various groups of people, who have come to perform hajj and discuss matters of Muslim interest.

The Saudi Arabian Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Minister for Religious Affairs, the Minister for Information, the Governor of Makkah, the Governor of Madinah, the Chief Justice of Makkah, the Chief Justice of Madinah, the Khatib and Chief Imam of the Kaaba, the Khatib and Chief Imam of the Masjid al Nabawi, Presidents of the Universities based in Makkah, Madinah and Jeddah, the Chief of Makkah Municipality, the Chief of Madinah Municipality and the Chief of Jeddah Municipality similarly may remain active during the hajj season and may meet cross sections of the hajjis who have come to perform hajj from different corners of the world to reinforce brotherhood.

In keeping with the spirit of hajj, conference of heads of state and government of the Muslim countries or the foreign ministers' or the ministers' of commerce and trade may be held.

Trade fair and book exhibition: At the same time, a fair of the trade organizations of the Muslim countries may be organized. To strengthen the cultural bond a book fair of the Islamic literature on history, culture, science and technology may be held. Such a fair should display the books published in the Muslim world and also books on Islam and Muslim interest published elsewhere.

Washroom: Now the negative thing. The most disgusting thing is the washroom facilities in Mina tent, 'Arafah tent and Aishah Mosque. I have not visited the washrooms in the Masjid al Haram at Makkah and the Masjid al Nabawi at Madinah and therefore I am not in a position to comment on the washrooms of the last two mosques.

In Mina tent and 'Arafah tent the washroom offers together urine facility, toilet facility and also facility for washing body, three in one place. This results in overcrowding and long queue. The government of Saudi Arabia may take immediate steps to separate these facilities that will automatically reduce the congestion and minimize the suffering of the hajjis.

In Mina tent, 'Arafah tent and also in 'Aishah Mosque water taps for cleaning urine and stool are not fixed in the wall, rather the taps are always found lying on the ground of the toilet cum washroom and the hajjis have to pick up the taps from the dirty floor which might impair the purity of their body requiring a fresh wash of the entire body. This is disgusting. Also dirty water overflows from one washroom to the other as the barrier wall is not up to the ground creating an unspeakable situation.

Senior officials of the Saudi government should visit these installations so that such anomalies do not exist. I urge upon the Saudi authorities to immediately solve this problem. Excepting this, the efforts of the government of Saudi Arabia to keep both the Harams clean are laudable

Madinah al Munawwarah: At the end of hajj we visited Madinah al Munawwarah, the Illuminated City of the Prophet. The massive parasols give a beautiful look to the mosque but some areas still need to be covered. The expansion work of the mosque which has just started hopefully will take note of it.

I was lucky to have been able to visit the rauda, the grave of Prophet Muhammad and those of the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr Siddiq and Umar bin Khattab, in the oldest part of the mosque sometime at midnight. In measured steps following the footsteps of the noble Prophet in and around Masjid al Nabawi we reached the cherished place. We stayed in the area of riad ul jannah, garden of paradise, the area between rauda of the Prophet and his pulpit for a short-while.

Standing before the place where Prophet Muhammad lived, planned, administered, judged, received foreign emissaries, led jihad, preached, loved and finally died is something incredible, dream of a lifetime. Emotions overpowered us. Some of the hajjis were trembling with emotions and burst out into tears. Love and respect for Prophet Muhammad was visible in everybody's eyes and pouring emotions from the core of heart made us motionless.

During the stay in Madinah we visited Jannat al Baqi in which the entire family of Prophet Muhammad with the exception of the first Muslim who accepted the truth of the message Prophet Muhammad received from Allah through Jibril, ummul muminin mother of the believers Prophet's wife Khadijah Khuwaylid, Prophet's uncle Hamza and the first two caliphs, Abu Bakr Siddiq and Umar bin Khattab, the rest of the family members including Prophet' brilliant wife ummul muminin mother of the believers Aishah bint Abu Bakr and his daughter Fatimah Zahra are buried together with the companions of the Prophet who passed away in Madinah.

In keeping with the pristine teachings of Islam taught by the last Prophet Muhammad there is no hero worship in this historic graveyard, all visitors are busy in offering fatiha and reciting darud in emotion choked voice. The whole graveyard has been leveled and there is no way to identify a particular grave, not even the burial place of the third caliph Uthman bin Affan.

Concluding observation: Kaaba is the symbol that connects all Muslims together wherever they may be. It also links us to our glorious and not-so-glorious past so that we may derive lessons and feel we are a part of eternal mission.

Hajj unites Muslims from all parts of the world with strong bonds of brotherhood, equality and compassion. That was what I experienced in the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah as well as in the holy sites of Mina, 'Arafah and Muzdalifah.

During the whole period of hajj, during tawaf, stay in Mina, stay in 'Arafah and stay in Muzdalifah I made two supplications – rabbana atina fid dunia hasanata wa fil akhirati hasanata wa qina azaban nar [Quran 2: 201]- O Allah give us good in this world and good in the Hereafter and save us from the torment of the fire; and rabbana akhrijna min hazi hil qariatiz zalim [Quran 4: 75]- O Allah save us from the oppressors. O Allah give victory to those Muslims who are weak, oppressed and jailed all over the world. I made a special tawaf with the niah, intention for welfare of all Muslims wherever they are.

While flying back to Bangladesh in retrospect I tried to refresh my thought as to what most important thing in particular had enthralled and charmed me and the reply instantly came from my heart: *compassion and fellow feeling*. It was this sympathy towards others which prompted a 12-13 years old Egyptian boy to extend the water bottle to my sick wife sacrificing his personal need to quench thirst. It is this compassion which prompted an elderly Pakistani brother to come forward to explain us the road to our destination at the Mina tent when we lost our way but apprehending that we would not be able to reach the destined tent he voluntarily led us to Mina tent after walking more than 90 minutes. Again it is kindness, love and respect which encouraged a Saudi young boy of 12-13 years of age to push the wheel-chair of my sick and tired wife up to Mina tent without arguing for rent.

In the flight I tried to recollect the comment of Malcom X about hajj which I read in his autobiography in 1965. American Black Muslim leader Malcom X, who became known as Malik El Shabazz after conversion to Islam, when asked during his performances of hajj by fellow hajjis what especially of hajj impressed him the most, he replied: “The *brotherhood*. The people of all races, colors, from all over the world coming together as *one!* It has proved to me the power of one God ” [Alex Haley, the Autobiography of Malcolm X, Penguin Books, U K, 1973, p - 452].

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Biography

Born on 28 February 1947 Shah Abdul Halim comes of the respectable family of spiritual master Shah Shamsuddin Bokhari at Katiadi under the district of Kishoregonj. He earned his Master's degree in Political Science from Dhaka University in 1970. He began his journalistic career in 1969 by joining now defunct Weekly Young Pakistan and then he switched over to public relations and served in coveted positions at different national and international organizations and financial institutions. Since later 1996 he is a regular contributor to the country's prestigious English newspapers: The New Nation, The News Today, The Bangladesh Today, The Independent and The Bangladesh Observer. He is also a contributor in the Bangla newspaper The Daily Naya Diganta. Currently he is the Chairman of Islamic Information Bureau Bangladesh, a non-profit organization to disseminate the teachings of Islam.

An eminent writer and researcher, Shah Abdul Halim has a good number of works published in national and international journals. His articles are available at website www.shahfoundationbd.org. He has to his credit four works: [i] Islam: A Contemporary Approach. [ii] Peace: A Far Cry, [iii] Power Game and [iv] Dialogue with the Deaf. His books - Crisis of Culture and The Way Out: Bangladesh Islamists' Impasse - have drawn the attention of the readers at home and abroad.

A distinguished cultural worker, Shah Abdul Halim is the cofounder of literary organizations: Muktabuddhi Shahittaya Sangha (Literary Guild for Free Thinkers) and Centre for National Culture, Bangladesh. Actively involved with the country's library movement, he is the Chief Advisor of Khilgaon Islamic Library, Dhaka, cofounder of Katiadi Islamic Library, Kishoregonj and patron of Shah Abdul Latif Library, Chatal, Kishoregonj. A notable social worker, Shah Abdul Halim is also the cofounder of national children and juvenile organization Phulkudi Ashar. A human rights activist, he is also the cofounder of Centre for Human Rights Bangladesh and the Chairman of Bangladesh Peace Foundation. He is also the Chairman of Bangladesh Center for Islam & Pluralism.

Shah Abdul Halim has received Ababil Award for his contribution as writer and researcher. He has also received Award from Asian University of Bangladesh for support and patronization of education. He is also member of reputed organizations: National Press Club Bangladesh and Bangla Academy. He has visited Nepal, India, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.