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A Qurbani Eid meal

Amanda Gill

The door of number seven loomed large in front of me. I rang the door bell and waited... it was Friday 12 June 1992, but this was no ordinary day, it was a very special day; special for my Muslim friends and me. For this day marked the celebration of Qurbani Eid, the Muslim festival of sacrifice and I had been invited to share in the celebration.

The door opened and I was greeted by 13 year old Nehida, who was adorned in a beautiful blue and gold Salwar Kameez made by her mother especially for the occasion. Stepping inside, I removed my shoes, as I always did when I visited, and went into the front room. There was an air of tranquility. What a contrast from my visit two days before! There had been total chaos as all the family worked together cleaning and tidying the house in preparation for the festival and receiving guests. I discovered that I was their first visitor and that the family had been waiting all morning for friends and relatives to arrive. No wonder Nehida appeared fidgety and agitated – hours of anticipation had exercised her patience.

Other family members came into the room and I was summoned into the dining room to partake in the meal. Bowls full of food were put in front of me. One contained curried meat; another salad and another, white fluffy rice. On a plate rested two Qurbani rotis which looked like chapatis but had a different taste and texture. Where did I begin? It was customary to start with the meat dish and roti. Wow! It was really hot and spicy. I then dipped into the cool, refreshing cucumber and tomato and after a while, I tried the rice. The savoury dish was followed by ripe, succulent melon. It was a splendid feast, a fine example of the wonderful hospitality which I had experienced on many occasions whilst visiting the family.

'So what is Qurbani Eid all about?' I enquired. I learned from the family that at this festival Muslims remember the time many, many years ago when God asked prophet Abraham to sacrifice the thing that was most precious to him. He chose, very reluctantly, his son, Ishmael. At God's command, Abraham took Ishmael to a quiet place, blindfolded him and was at the point of killing his son when a miraculous event occurred. God replaced Ishmael with a goat and Ishmael was saved. God then praised Abraham for his trust and faithfulness and told him to sacrifice the animal instead.

I also learned that at Qurbani Eid each Muslim family orders a whole animal, a cow, sheep or goat, from the local halal butcher. The butcher kills the animal in a special way by calling on the name of Allah and by naming the family members, as requested by the family. The meat is then divided up. A third is distributed to the poorer members of the community and the remainder is passed to the family the night before Eid begins. The family keeps a portion of this and the rest is cooked and given to those who visit on the day of Qurbani Eid.

As I munched my way through the meal, other visitors began to arrive and they too joined in with the feast. Soon the tranquil atmosphere gave way to a hubbub of sound – adults and children chattering away in Bengali. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but nevertheless, it was a pleasure and a privilege to be part of an important celebration and to be with people who value each other and the Eid festival which brought them closer together.