

Beyond subsidies

The government's decision to abolish the Haj subsidy has resulted in an interesting debate in the media. The opposition has criticised the PTI government for this move, saying that the Haj subsidy should not be withdrawn. But the government is of the view that the current economic situation of the country doesn't permit offering the subsidy.

Such conflicting narratives are confusing people who used to utilise their savings to perform Haj with enthusiasm. A few suggestions should be taken into account to improve Haj operations.

The concept of a 'pilgrim' exists in every religion. For hundreds of years, Haj, the Kumbh Mela and Jerusalem have attracted many pilgrims who visit such sacred sites to seek spiritual satisfaction and eternal peace.

Historically, the Haj subsidy traces its roots to the British colonial era. Prior to this, Muslims in the Subcontinent travelled to the kingdom of Hejaz in caravans. In 1932, the Port Haj Committees Act was passed, which empowered government-funded Hajj committees, operating from Karachi, Bombay and Calcutta, to offer subsidised Haj packages through sea routes. This initiative actually ensured a monopoly for the Mogul Line, a shipping company owned by the British company, Turner Morrison.

After Partition, the Indian government introduced the Haj Committee Act to manage Hajj affairs. Like the 1932 act, a Haj subsidy was offered to cover overhead expenses. Today, Haj operations in India are the responsibility of the Central Haj Committee, which falls under the Indian foreign ministry. However, we have a full-fledged Ministry for Religious Affairs in our country.

During her tenure, Indira Gandhi changed the mode of travel for Haj from ships to aircrafts. The Indian government offered a new subsidy to allow pilgrims to travel in airplanes even if they purchase tickets equivalent to sea fares. However, Indian Muslims demanded an end to the Haj subsidy, saying that the subsidy is actually in favour of the state-owned Air India.

Many Muslim parliamentarians, including Asaduddin Owaisi, raised voice in the Indian parliament to put an end to government-financed Haj. This was also long-standing demand of Syed Ahmed Bukhari, the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid. In order to ensure high-quality services at the cheapest prices, the Shahi Imam proposed that an independent organisation should be set up to hold fair biddings and allot tenders of tickets along the lines of what happens in Malaysia.

The matter of the Haj subsidy also echoed in the Indian Supreme Court. In 2012, a two-judge bench of the country's highest court asked the government to end the subsidy within the next 10 years. In his written note, he cited passages from the Holy Quran, which mention that Haj is only compulsory for those Muslims who can afford it. According to media reports, the judgment was based on two important factors: that the Haj subsidy is against Islamic principles and that Muslim pilgrims are unable to benefit from the subsidy. Following the court's orders, the Haj subsidy was completely abolished in India last year.

Ironically, a similar situation can also be observed in our country where a large share of the Haj subsidy actually goes to PIA. Despite paying a huge amount of money, Haj pilgrims from Pakistan have complained about countless difficulties. The federal cabinet has recently decided to withdraw the Haj subsidy. However, this subsidy should not be discontinued so suddenly. Instead, it should be withdrawn in a step-by-step manner.

A majority of Pakistanis are worried about covering extra expenses beyond their budget. Following the Indonesian model, a special Haj fund must be established by the government. Pakistani nationals and overseas Pakistanis, who consider serving Haj pilgrims their religious duty, will be more comfortable about contributing towards the fund. If such a fund is established, I will not only be the first person to contribute towards this fund, but will also ask other people to support this noble cause.

Air fares will be reduced once the national carrier's monopoly is broken in this regard. Other private and international airlines must be allowed to offer Haj packages through open tenders and biddings. Similarly, the practice of encouraging pilgrims to travel by sea must also be restored as the costs won't amount to more than Rs30,000. During the weeklong journey, necessary religious teachings could also be provided.

Haj is, in fact, a holy worship to please God and there must be no political point-scoring. I would like to urge the opposition to understand the real spirit of the Haj philosophy and the government's intention for ending the subsidy. Instead of demanding subsidies, we must ask the government to ensure high-quality Haj facilities at relatively cheap prices.

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