

Hajj Pilgrimage – Practices and Challenges: A Comparative study of Sri Lanka and India

Jalaldeen, MSM*

The word Hajj, linguistically, means heading to a place for the sake of visiting; in Islamic terminology, it implies heading to Makkah to observe the rituals of pilgrimage. Hajj is obligated by Allaah upon every Muslim, male and female, who is physically and financially capable. It is obligatory only once during the lifetime of a Muslim. Allaah Almighty Says (what means): “...*And [due] to Allaah from the people is a pilgrimage to the House – for whoever is able to find thereto a way....*”[Quran 3:97]. It was the practice in Sri Lanka that the department of Muslim religious and Cultural affairs is making all arrangements for Hajj pilgrimage including quota from Saudi Government and distribution it among travel agencies. Thousands of Sri Lankan Muslims have performed hajj pilgrimage this year and it was estimated that approximately 3 million Muslims were performed Hajj this year from different parts of the world. The travel agencies have collected about five hundred fifty thousand Sri Lankan rupees to six hundred thousand rupees from every single person who travels to pilgrimage. Hajj Pilgrims’ Association alleged that some travel agencies were charging more than the maximum fee from the pilgrims on the pretext of providing more facilities. This is illegal and the travel agents who charge more than Rs. 400,000 must get prior written approval from the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural affairs after submitting documentary proof of Facilities for hajj pilgrims. Muslims of India are receiving some financial assistant for their Hajj pilgrimage from Indian Government by Hajj subsidy. The program has its origins in British colonial era. In post-colonial era, the Nehru government expanded the program in 1959 with the Hajj Act. The subsidy and taxpayer funded arrangements initially applied to Muslim Indian pilgrims traveling for religious reasons to Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Jordan. Since 1973, pilgrims applying through the Haj Committee of India are offered a concessionary fare on Air India. Since 2000, over 1.5 million Muslims have used the subsidy; since 2008, over 120,000 Indian Muslim every year make use of the subsidy. My investigation on this matter has revealed that every Hajj pilgrims of India are paid only one hundred and thirty thousand Indian rupees (approximately three hundred and forty thousand Sri Lankan rupees) for their Hajj pilgrimage. This paper will reveal this controversial issue into the light comparing the practices and challenges of Hajj pilgrimage in Sri Lanka and India. This is a pioneer study in this field.

Key words: Hajj, Sri Lanka, India, Subsidy

To whom correspondence should be addressed: msmjalaldin@yahoo.com

*Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Islamic Studies & Arabic Language, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka