

Going to the Fair

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Renewed popularity for traditional fairs where villagers come to buy and sell.

The “milah” or village fair is a popular event in Helmand these days. Let’s hear from an IWPR radio reporter about the history of the milah, and its importance and benefit to Helmand’s people:

For hundreds of years, people have kept up the tradition of holding milahs. They are a way for people in neighbouring villages to meet up with each other. At a milah, people bring all kinds of things to sell - food, music, tape recorders and many other items. You can hear the sound of it from far away.

Helmandis respect the tradition and they see it as their duty to hold milahs.

An old man, Ghaurusuddin, says, “Milahs have been around for as long as I can remember. We shouldn’t abandon this tradition - it’s a legacy from our grandfathers.”

Since the area used for the milah is very dusty because of the crowds, many of the participants here are covering their mouths and noses.

At a milah, all kinds of transactions go on, from food and music to money. Basically, the milah is a shopping opportunity. People can do a week’s worth of shopping in one day. Local people can buy essentials for the home at a low price.

“You can find meat, eggs and other groceries for less than in the towns, so we only shop at the milah,” says Mohammad Hashem, who has come to the fair.

You’ll find a village holding a milah every day of the week. They are held at shrines, wrestling grounds and other traditional sites.

Right now I’m at a milah in Mardja. Janan Mohammad, a money changer, says this is a good place for doing business.

“The people who come to the milah bring Pakistani rupees, and I’m exchanging them. I’ll make more money today than any day of the week.”

There are some writers walking around the milah, trying to compare it with past tradition. One of them, Mohammad Ali Hanifi, didn’t want me to record his voice but told me that in previous years, people couldn’t hold milahs freely. People were under threat and didn’t come to the milahs. Now the tradition is again at its peak. Everyone respects the milah, and they’re happy, he says.

I too have been able to compare the milahs of today with those held in the past. People are more interested in them than before. If only government officials would pay a little more attention to them, it’s

possible everyone would start holding milahs.

Mohammad Ismael Sheryatar for IWPR in Helmand.

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