

MUHARRAM: MARTYRDOM, MOURNING & SELF- FLAGELLATION

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(English Version)

Is Muharram a period for celebration or mourning? Frankly, most non-Muslims are confused as to whether to send greetings or not on this 'declared holiday'. Muharram does not denote one day but is the name of an entire month, the first and one of the holiest in the Islamic Hijri Calendar. Even before the arrival of Islam, some months were considered as very special in western Asia and war or aggression were banned during these months.

To understand why so many Muslims come out in processions, carrying those tall decorated structures called tazias, beating their chests to "Ya Hasan, Ya Husain" and where exactly is Karbala, we need to understand the events that followed the death of Hazrat Mohammad in 632 AD. He succeeded, as few ever have, in uniting several warring Arab tribes under the banner of one religion, but certain age-old ethnic tensions, rivalries and differences persisted under the surface. Since the Prophet died without formally appointing a successor, a dispute arose on whether the next leader of Islam should be chosen by some sort of a democratic consensus or whether to follow the lineage of the Prophet. In simple terms, while the Sunnis believe the Prophet's trusted friend and advisor Abu Bakr was the first rightful leader of Muslims or Khalif, the Shias demanded that a relative of the Prophet, namely, his cousin and son-in-law, Hazrat Ali should hold the title. Both men did eventually adorn this holy office, Abu Bakr as the first Khalif till his death and Ali as the fourth, after the two in between were assassinated. The real war thus began after Hazrat Ali's demise and Shias insisted that the Prophet's family, namely Ali's

son, Imam Husain should succeed as Khalif, since the elder son, Imam Hasan had retired to Mecca, where he was murdered, later. Sunnis refused and declared that Islam and the spirit of the Prophet did not mandate this line of succession.

There was palpable tension, but Imam Ali proceeded fearlessly from Mecca to assume the office of Khalif of all Muslims. Near Baghdad, however, the cruel ruler, Yazid, encircled him and slaughtered quite mercilessly not only Husain but 72 members of his group including women and suckling infants. The year was 680 AD, the fateful day was 'Ashura', the 10th of the month of Muharram and the place was Karbala on the banks of the river Euphrates, where this irreparable schism in Islam was caused by the sword. Shias thus observe Muharram as the month of deep mourning and day of Ashura as the climax.

But, the majority of Muslims, the Sunnis, deny that Ashura is commemorated only because of this single event. Sunnis adduce evidence that the Prophet himself had observed this date as a holy one, even before the Karbala incident. Hazrat Mohammad wanted Muslims to remember the day of Ashura on which Prophet Moses or Musa Nabi liberated the chosen people of God out of bondage in Egypt, by parting the waters of the Red Sea for his followers to walk over its bed. This very day was also sacred because of its association with other Biblical prophets, called nabis by muslims, like Adam or Adem, Noah or Nuh and Job or Ayub. It is remarkable how all the three Semitic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, still share a large part of their "common history" in the sense that all of them honour not only those mentioned, but many others, such as Abraham or Ibrahim, Isaac or Ishaq, Jacob or Yaqoob, Joseph or Yusuf as their prophets.

Though Shias necessarily come out in Muharram processions with tazias and weapons for three or four days preceding the evening of Ashura and of course, on

the main day, Sunnis also observe the period in their own way. Sufism has been a great bridge not only between Hindus and Muslims, but also between Shias and Sunnis. Except the extreme orthodox Wahabis and Salafis, who disown all plural traditions, many Sunnis hold both Imam Husain and Ashura in great reverence, though they abjure public protestations of lament and the painful rites of self-flagellation like Shias. Sadia Dehlvi and Muzaffar Ali have reminded us about the Sufi traditions at Ajmer Sharif during Muharram and how even musicians, Shia, Sufi or Hindu, would not play their instruments for 10 days. Muslims of both denominations would also avoid celebrations.

In India, we come across numerous European reports right from the 17th and 18th centuries, about large public gatherings of Shias at Hyderabad, Bombay, Lucknow, Dacca, Murshidabad, Patna, Hooghly and Calcutta, where the event was commemorated with great pomp and solemnity. According to a 19th century observer, Pierre Collier "the most amazing spectacle of religious enthusiasm that one may see anywhere in the world is to see these men burst into groans, tears and wild cries of grief; to see their breasts bruised and skin broken by the beating of their fists; to see them covered with blood, dust, and sweat, their faces haggard, their eyes blazing with excitement; to hear one of them recite part of the tale of woes, his eyes streaming with tears and his voice choked with emotion."

The lashes of the whip that brings forth blood or the sword-plays that result in multiple wounds that many Shias do, to feel the torments of Hasan and Husain, are however not a unique ritual. Similar rites of self-flagellation are a must during the Charak or Gajans in Eastern India or the Tai-Pusam in South, when devotees pierce their cheeks and tongues with big sharp needles and many drive large hooks into their backs as well, to swing dizzily. Identical self-torture is also seen among Taoists or Buddhists during, say, Phuket's Vegetarian Festival in October in

Thailand. Christianity had called these as "barbaric pagan customs" but later permitted certain rituals of self-flagellation during Easter in the Philippines or in Latin American countries. On Good Friday, numerous penitents emulate the sufferings of Jesus Christ by getting themselves literally crucified or thrust thorny crowns on their heads to bleed like Jesus, or carry heavy chains and painful crosses up the hill, as he had done. But then, as Saeed Naqvi says, such narrations fail to observe the finer aspects of Shia practices.

Urdu poetry reached peaks of grandeur in the epics called Marsias written by masters like Munshi Channulal Dilgeer, Mir Anis, Mirza Dabeer, Josh Malihabadi or experience the poetry, music and popular dirges sung in large choruses. Even Naushad, the renowned Bollywood music director, borrowed his 'choruses' from the 'nohas' of Awadh. History and religion may stir emotions and enjoin rituals, but every festival of joy or sorrow provides an occasion to come together and to feel together. They also offer the creative an opportunity to express such sweet experiences through poetry, song, music, dance and other art forms.