



MOHARRAM AS A CULTURAL TEXT: ISSUES AND SELECT OBSERVATIONS

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ABSTRACT

If we look at the spread and reception of Muharram across the globe, we find it a significant cultural text of humanity encompassing the loftiest of human values to be seen and associated with the event of Karbala. The paper on the one hand discusses the contexts of Moharram, on the other hand it focuses on different connotations concerned, across the sects and faiths. The present paper offers a comprehensive note on the event of Muharram and its reception in the human psyche, especially that of Shia collective consciousness.

Key Words : Muharram, Imam Hussain, Shia, Hussaini Brahmin

INTRODUCTION:

The event of Muharram occurred about 1400 years ago in the desolate desert of Karbala in Iraq. The massacre of about 100 people belonging to the household of Prophet Muhammad PBUH, that included Prophet Muhammad's grandson Imam Hussain and his followers, continues to shake the hearts of conscientious people of all ages and eras. How and why does the massacre that took place 1400 years ago continue to reverberate even today? Some events of history transcend time and space as the objective of those particular events becomes truly universal and it affects everyone everywhere.

DISCUSSION :

The event of Karbala is one such event. Firstly, it challenged the might of the most powerful imperial force of the time, the Muslim Umayyad Dynasty which was ruling about 2/3rds of

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the world at that time. Secondly, the very objective of that event was to uphold the very basis of human dignity i.e. to safeguard and protect the 'Right to say No'. Imam Hussain felt that this Right is the essence of human values and it has to be preserved at any cost and, truly, it costed him his all and everything. In the pursuit to protect this Right he sacrificed everything at his command including 18 of his family members, 54 -70 of his friends and followers, and even the women of the Prophet's household that included grand-daughters and great-grand-daughters of the Prophet who were imprisoned, following the events of Karbala. When he chose to challenge and fight the unjust and cruel rulers of time he took precautions that this battle should not be seen as one for Muslims only or for power but that it had to be totally universal. That is why when Imam Hussain collected a small band of people to challenge the might of the most powerful emperor of the time, Yazeed, he drew people from all possible and diverse backgrounds of that time. Those about-100 people led by the Prophet's grandson, Imam Hussain, who fought against the cruel powers, included people from all main tribes of Arabia i.e Bani Asad, Jahbi, Bijli, Khasami, Kanda, Ghaffari, Kalbi, Azmi, Tamimi, Tai, Taghleebi, Jahani tribes and Ansar, and from all nearby nationalities i.e. from Yemen, Egypt, Turkey, Persia, Africa, India, and, then, from all races—blacks, whites, Arabs, Asians—and from all religious backgrounds relevant at that time i.e. Christians (Wahab Kalbi & family), Jews (martyred immediately after the beheading of Imam Hussain), Hindus (Rahab Dutt and 6 others), and from all main sects of the Arab world at that time including Usmanis(Zuhair ibn Qain and Family), Alawis, etc. Imam Hussain wanted to showcase that his struggle is truly cosmopolitan and it is for everybody and should not be seen from the prism of a particular religion or region. Thus, even the composition of the army of Hussain was totally representative of the world. It was intentionally chosen as the objective of that struggle was totally universal in nature and, even now, it appeals to everyone of all ages, all regions and all times. The mighty ruler, Yazeed, wanted allegiance of the household of the Prophet to legitimize his cruel and inhuman deeds against humankind. This allegiance from the household of the Prophet was demanded by the tyrant emperor so that such cruel and inhuman deeds could be perpetuated in the name of Islam. Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet, had rejected the demand and said loudly that it is the basic human right to say 'No' and that cannot be compromised. Imam Hussain knew that he stood no chance to survive as he along with his 100 followers were up against about 30,000 troops of the ruler who surrounded them. Yet he remained steadfast and unflinching in his resolve to protect the basic rights of human beings. He could have saved the lives of his family and followers by just accepting the demands of the ruler but that would have defeated the very essence of Islam and of any dignified society. Therefore, he chose to sacrifice everything including his 6 month old baby, his other sons and 18 of his family members and about 70 of his followers, fighting valiantly for 3 days despite no access to water or food that had been cut off by the surrounding troops. Thus, if the entire struggle is seen from a universal point of view, then the sacrifice made by Imam Hussain and his followers has cosmopolitan appeal as it was



made to uphold the uncompromising 'Right to say No' to any demands from any tyrant at any point of time anywhere in the world. And this is the essence of the message of the Karbala event. Perhaps this is the reason why Mahatma Gandhi while resisting the might of the British during the Freedom Struggle had taken inspiration from Karbala. He wrote in his newspaper, *Young India* that, "I learnt from (Imam) Hussain how to achieve victory while being oppressed". Nelson Mandela has mentioned in his book that he got inspiration from Imam Hussain to continue, when he was so frustrated in his struggle against the apartheid regime that one evening he had almost decided to abandon the struggle. Martin Luther King Jr. got inspiration from Karbala while fighting against white supremacy. Caribbean countries like Trinidad & Tobago used the Muharram event in their freedom struggle to boost the morale of its freedom fighters. These are only few of the examples in history where the event of Karbala has given strength and determination to the people world-over when they were up against the oppression and cruel rulers of the time. Perhaps this is the reason Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore said of the event of Karbala that "in order to keep alive justice and truth, instead of an army or weapons, success can be achieved by sacrificing lives, exactly what Imam Husain did". Even today you will find people from all faiths and all regions thronging to the mausoleum of Imam Hussain and his followers at the City of Karbala that is open for everybody and anybody as Imam Hussain and his ideals are for entire mankind and cannot be confined only to the followers of Islam. I'm attaching some photographs to illuminate my points in this regards.

The present paper offers a discussion on the contribution of Hindus, Christians, Jews in the event of Karbala in the year 680AD. These days Muharram is being commemorated all over the world. The battle of Karbala between evil's forces and a small band of 72 people representing the truthfulness occurred in the year 680 AD in the desolated desert of Karbala a place about 80 Kms from Baghdad (Iraq). Imam Hussain, who was grandson of Prophet Muhammad PBUH, was leading a small group of people who had challenged the might of the so called tyrannical Muslim ruler of the time who was out to destroy the fabric of humanity and human values. Imam Hussain assembled about 60 of his followers representing various tribes, backgrounds, regions and even religious beliefs in order to give a wider connotation to the struggle against the repressive and criminal regime.

Among the various people who had participated in this struggle, there were people from various beliefs who joined together with Imam Hussain to fight the forces of evil. Among the martyrs in Karbala were seven Hindus lead by Rahab Dutt, a Brahmin. These Brahmins were believed to be descendants of Ashvatthaama, son of Guru Dronacharya. These 7 Brahmins were martyred when they fought the forces of evil in the battle of Karbala when they reached to help Imam Hussain. The descendants of these martyred Brahmins called themselves Hussaini Brahmin or Dutt Brahmins or Mohiyal Brahmins. Even today just before the city of



Karbala, a small city is named as Al- Hindiya in memory of such Hindu participants who loved Imam Hussain immensely even though they followed their own religion.

In the battle of Karbala, wahab Al-Kalbi who belonged to Al Kalb tribe, a predominantly Christian tribe, fought alongside Imam Hussain with a cross in his hand and was martyred. Even his wife and mother also were killed by the Umayyad army in Karbala. John Bin Huwai, a Christian freed slave also fought alongside Imam Hussain and got martyred. When Imam Hussain was beheaded in the battle of Karbala, a Jew herdsman nearby comes to know about the killings and he came and fought with rulers army and got killed.

The above mentioned episode clearly established the fact that the battle of Karbala against the forces of evil was fought by representatives of almost all major beliefs of the time. This amply demonstrates the universal and pan-world appeal of the message that emanated from the battle of Karbala. Perhaps this is the reason that Imam Hussain is revered universally by adherents of all religions and beliefs of the world. I have myself seen people from all beliefs and religion converged annually at Karbala in Iraq to pay their homage to the memory of Imam Hussain.

My non-Muslim friends, at times, must be wondering why Muslims, particularly Shia Muslims, flagellate themselves in grieving, beating their chests, and using knives and chains to inflict wound upon themselves. No sane person would do that in grieving without overwhelming reasons for doing so. So I find it prudent to bring out certain sordid facts about what happened on this day in Karbala 1340 years ago. The whole family of the Prophet was brutally massacred and the manner in which the brutal act was committed made it a never before sort of cruelty. And the fact that it had happened to the Prophet's nearest family had made this act even more gruesome. If you know what happened then probably you can gauge why the Muslims today are commemorating Muharram so passionately in such a grieving manner. I am listing some of the cruelest deeds the Muslim rulers did to Prophet's family in Karbala:

1. The Prophet's family was encircled by the ruler's army and were deprived of water and food for 8 days and they were left with absolutely no water or food for the last 3 days in the scorching summer heat when the day temperature touched more than 50°C. The starving and thirsty included the 6 months old great grandson of Prophet Muhammad PBUH, the 4 years old great grand-daughter of the Prophet besides other grandsons and daughters and other male and female relatives of the Prophet.
2. The 6 months old great grandson of the Prophet was killed by an arrow when the Prophet's grandson Hussain asked for water for him.



3. The 18 years old great grandson of the Prophet was killed by spears piercing through his chest.
4. The 9 years great grandson of the Prophet was killed and his dead body was trampled by the hoofs of the horses.
5. 2 great grandsons of the Prophet aged 8 & 11 years were killed and beheaded by swords.
6. The Prophet's grandson Imam Hussain was beheaded while he was performing namaz. Earlier he was so brutally wounded before offering namaz that, as per Arab war customs of counting wounds on the body of the slain soldiers, the total wounds inflicted on the body of Imam Hussain were counted in hundreds. Such was the cruelty. His severed head then was raised on a spear.
7. Another Prophet's grandson was killed after both his arms were severed
8. After killing all adult male members except one of Imam Hussain's sons (Imam Sajjad who was seriously sick), the criminal army had set the camp of the Prophet's household on fire.
9. All the female members of the Prophet's family were taken into custody and their head garbs and Chadars were forcibly removed. All of them were chained and made to sit on bare-back camels to be taken to Damascus via Kufa a journey which took months in the scorching heat and passed through cities displaying the chained Prophet's family. Such cruelty was aimed at dissuading the people from protesting against the killings.
10. Imam Hussain's 4 year old daughter Ruqaiyya (also know as Sakina) was tortured immeasurably with continued slappings and caning in public. The torture was so unbearable that the 4 year old later died in custody.
11. The bodies of the prophet's slain family members were dismembered and their heads raised on spears and were put on display all the through the journey from Karbala to Damascus.
12. All this cruelty was committed against the Prophet's family just because they did not bow to the wishes of the corrupt rulers and give their allegiance and legitimise the ruler's criminal acts being committed in the name of Islam.

Now when such ghastly cruelty of the highest order was committed against the nearest and dearest one of the Prophet's family, then the Muslims, particularly Shia Muslims, who always swear by the Prophet and his family have no other way but to grieve in the manner they are doing for the last 1340 years.



Yes, at times it looks very disturbing that even young kids are commemorating Muharram with inflicting wounds upon themselves while grieving but the feelings for Imam Hussain and Prophet's family are so high that they see no reason or logic in not doing so. After all they love Imam Hussain so much and it is said that वो इश्क़ क्या जिसमें जूनन न हो। It is practised all over the world since last 1300 years. Strange but true that no tears were shed in such quantity and manner for anybody else in the annals of human history than for Imam Hussain and his family members.

CONCLUSION :

In the light of the above discussion ,if we look at the spread and reception of Muharram across the globe , we find it a significant cultural text of humanity encompassing the loftiest o human values to be seen and associated with the event of Karbala . The paper on the one hand discusses the contexts of Moharram , on the other hand it focuses on different connotations concerned ,across the sects and faiths .The above discussion offers a comprehensive note on the event of Muharram and its reception in the human psyche , especially that of Shia collective consciousness.

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