

The Painful Remembrance: Ashura's Historical and Spiritual Significance

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(Clockwise) Shia community during 10th days of Ashura in Kolkata, Tazia and caricature of Imam Hussain's death at Karbala | Author

I remember the tremendous tension that I went through as SDO Barrackpur and Magistrate in charge of “Muharram” at Loha Gate in Agarpara in 1978 — as oceans of frenzied humans went all around me, lashing and bleeding themselves with whips, chains and fighting dangerously swords — crying “Ya Hassan, Ya Hussain”! It continued through the evening and night. Though there were grievous and other (self-inflicted) injuries, I could report early in the morning that it was “peaceful” and “law and order under control”.

This day, like today, is actually the day of Ashura on the 10th day of the month of Muharram, which we refer to mistakenly as “Muharram”. It commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain (Husayn), grandson of Prophet Muhammad, who was the third Imam of the Shia community.

History says that after the death of Hazrat Mohammad in 632 AD, disunity and disputes arose among the several warring Arab tribes that had come together. One was on who would be the next

leader and how to select him — by consensus or follow the blood lineage of the Prophet, and both these options were tried out for the highest seat of Islam, called the Khalifa. Hazrat Abu Bakr was the first, and Hazrat Ali became the fourth Khalifa — after the two in between were assassinated — which shows how difficult the situation was.

The most terrible confrontation took place in 680 AD, when Imam Hussain and his 72 followers, including women and infants, were mercilessly slaughtered by a tyrannical ruler, Yazid — to stop the bloodline of Hazrat Muhammad from assuming the Khalifa. This led to the final rupture between those who swear by Hussain (and his pre-deceased brother Hassan), called Shias and the majority of Muslims, called Sunnis.

Shia Muslims consider this day as the darkest but holiest and mark the period with ceremonial mourning by recalling the pain of the last moments of those who fought and died for their principles. Their mourning reached its height on the day of Ashura, when they came out in processions, in black clothes, carrying tall decorated tazias, beating their chests. Many practice very painful rites of self-flagellation — the type that I had shuddered to see in 1978, and again in 1979.

Several Sunnis also observe Ashura but they insist that the day is holy not only because of Karbala, but because the Prophet had observed this day. He honoured Prophet Moses or Musa Nabi, who miraculously parted the waters of the Red Sea on this day — to lead his people out of bondage in Egypt.

We get written records as early as the 17th century, from Europeans in India that there were large public gatherings on Ashura at the towns of Hyderabad, Bombay, Lucknow, Dacca, Patna, Murshidabad, Hooghly and Calcutta, where the event was observed with solemnity. They were aghast to see the dangerous sword plays and blood in the massive processions.

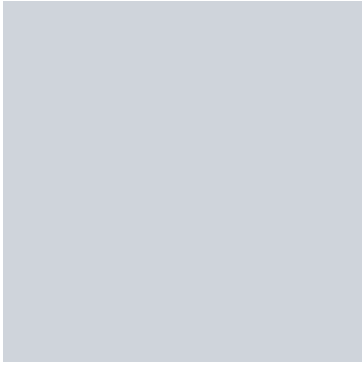
Before ending, I must talk of just one remarkable Ashsura in Kolkata at Gol Kothi, in Chitpur — flashes of which are in 3 of these photos. It is so moving to see every one of the hundreds present at Gol Kothi literally howling and mourning the massacre at Karbala — as if their family members had been killed. Then, begins the chanting “Ya Ali Asgar”— slow at first and then picking up in tempo and volume. Large boxes called ‘Tabut’, representing the coffins of the martyrs appear and are passed around, with everyone trying to carry or touch them.

‘Zuljanah’—Hussain’s horse, is mandatory and a beautiful white horse, all decked up, walks calmly through the frenzied crowd. This is followed by the crowd beating its chest most animatedly, while several men recreate the dying pain of the martyrs of Karbala by slashing themselves with razors, knives and whips. This is the painful ritual of ‘Zanjeera Maatam’ that I described at Agarpara.

I am grateful to my cousin, Shaiqua Murshed, who pointed to the blog note with photos posted by Deepanjan Ghosh, made with help from Iftekhar Ahsan.

Incidentally, [I have witnessed](#) equally gory rituals of self-flagellation among Hindus during Chark

and Gajan and seen photos of blood and pain during the Catholic rites of Easter in the Philippines and Latin America. Religion has its own domain and [faith is what matters](#).



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