

Muharram has got Indianised over the years

Quite spiritedly, fervently and emotionally like the Ramlila, Muharram in India observes the victory of virtue over evil. It commemorates the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain, the younger grandson of Prophet Mohammed. In India, it is revered by all communities, especially the Hindus in Varanasi, Lucknow, Allahabad, Amroha, Indore, Nagpur, Jaipur, Phagwara in Punjab, [Bhopal](#) and Kanpur.

Muharram is not a festival to be celebrated, rather it is to be observed with solemnity as a day of mourning. It was on the 10th day of Muharram that Hussain, along with family members and 72 others, was brutally killed by Syria's ruler Ameer Muawiah. Every year Muharram reminds us of the most treacherous, heartrending and testing times faced by Hussain because of the tyrannical ways of Muawiah and his son Yazid.

Being the son of Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter, Hussain was his maternal grandfather's most beloved. It has been recorded that the Prophet loved Hussain so much that he used to kiss his grandchild's forehead saying, 'He who befriends Hussain, befriends me and he who hurts Hussain, hurts me!'

The 61st year of the Hijri calendar (638 AD) for the Arab world proved to be most unfortunate as Muawiah enthroned his tyrant son Yazid who - proving to be more depraved than his father - obliterated the Nizam-e-Shoora (democracy) and replaced with a tyrannical despotism.

Yazid was a man of wicked pursuits, including natural and unnatural pleasures of the flesh and addiction to intoxicants. He found pleasure in seeing people die while writhing in pain.

When Yazid offered Hussain a position of power (as is the order of today's power-hungry political hawks), the latter refused and asked Yazid to mend his fiendish ways. Yazid challenged Hussain to an open conflict. Choosing against confrontation, Hussain proceeded to Madina. On the second day of Muharram, the unarmed caravan of Hussain reached the Karbala only to be tormented by a 6,000-strong army of Yazid. Hussain's eldest son Ali Akbar was slashed to pieces by Jarrar-bin-Tamimi and younger son Ali Asghar beheaded. Daughter Sakina died for want of water.

When Yazid asked if he accepted his authority, Hussain said his subservience was only to Allah. At this Hussain was shot at by a volley of arrows by the Yezidi army. Even after Hussain died, Yazid's soldiers trampled over his mortal remains. This sacrifice is remembered everywhere in the world, but nowhere is it observed as in India for it has merged seamlessly into the Indian milieu.

Regarding the 'Indianisation' of Muharram and communal harmony on the occasion, Khwaja Hasan Sani Nizami, the sajjadanashin of Dargah Nizamuddin, relates that Varanasi - the land of famous ghats and Vedic saints - has a tradition of observing Muharram with many Hindu families fasting along with their Muslim brethren.

Varanasi's Shivala Mohalla boasts of the most artistic 'tazias' (replicas of the Hussain's tomb). Tazia's ritual representation resembles the burning of evil effigies on the Hindu festival of Dussehra. Though identical in spirit, the tazia differs from the Dussehra in that it is buried while the effigies of Ravana, Meghnad and Kumbhkarna are burnt.

Italian artist Bruno Cabrini's etchings depict Muharram processions with rath (Hindu chariots)

shaped tazias during the 18th and 19th centuries in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra by the Hindus. He has recorded his astonishment: 'How come these Brahmins observe Muharram with such devotion and sincerity and devotion even though they are dedicated Hindus and do not permit slaughtering of any animal in the manner prescribed by Islam?'

Beautiful imambaras (imam's home replicas) were erected by the Hindu rulers of Vijayanagar during the 16th and 17th centuries. Even the Scindias of Gwalior and the Holkar Maharajas of Indore used to conduct the special majalis (Muharram congregations).

A lot of credit goes to the Sufi saints for making Muharram an occasion to demolish religion, caste and class barriers, thus symbolising the day as one of amnesty and humanity - resembling that of Dussehra.

Jamia Millia Islamia vice chancellor Shahid Mahdi said that Muharram alums are revered by most Hindus like the Ramlila processions. Sufi saints delivered sanity messages to feudal lords who tried to divide communities along religion, caste and creed.

There had been an effort to create a rift between the two major sects of Muslims - Shias and Sunnis. It is well known that the Karbala tragedy was an outcome of the feudalisation of Islamic concepts, an unfortunate procedure initiated after the Prophet's death and consolidated by Muawiah's nomination of son Yazid to the throne.

The Sufi saints, along with the Shia ulema (Muslim scholars trained in Islam), encouraged the mix of indigenous elements from the rich cultural heritage of the land with that of Muharram - both conveying the message of peaceful coexistence. The way Lord Rama fought against the tyrannical Ravana, so did Hussain against Yazid - the only difference being that Hussain got martyred while Rama vanquished Ravana!

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