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Muharram in India: Indigenous in Spirit

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MUHARRAM commemorates the martyrdom of Hussain, the younger grandson of Prophet Mohammed. In India it has been traditionally observed with extraordinary fervour with the Hindu communities also joining in, particularly in Varanasi, Lucknow, Allahabad, Amroha, Indore, Nagpur, Jaipur, Phagwara in Punjab, Bhopal and Kanpur.

Being the son of Fatimah, Prophet Mohammed's daughter, Hussain was greatly loved by his grandfather who used to kiss his grandchild's forehead saying, "He who befriends Hussain, befriends me and he who hurts Hussain, hurts me!" Yazid, the ruler of Syria on coming to power obliterated the Nizam-e-Shoora (democracy) and replaced it by his tyrannical despotism wreaking havoc on the commoners. He offered inducements including positions of power to Imam Hussain but Hussain refused and asked Yazid to mend his ways. Yazid threatened to harm him and his near and dear ones and his followers. Desiring not to opt the way of confrontation, Hussain proceeded to Madina. On the second day of Muharram, the unarmed caravan of Hussain reached the Karbala only to be confronted by a 6000 strong army of Yazid which went on a rampage, and burnt the camps of Hussain and his followers.

Hussain's eldest son Ali Akbar was slashed to pieces by Jarrar-bin-Tamimi, a brutal general of Yazid. The younger son Ali Asghar's head was separated and displayed on the tip of a spear. His daughter Sakina died in the desert of dehydration. Finally when only Hussain was left, Yazid asked him if he accepted his authority. Hussain said that 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, the soldiers of Yazid kept on trampling over his mortal remains. This sacrifice is remembered everywhere in the world but it is observed with special fervour in India, the tradition having merged in the Indian milieu.

Regarding the "Indianisation" of Muharram and the communal harmony exhibited on the occasion, Khwaja Hasan Sani Nizami, the venerated sajjadanashin of Dargah Nizamuddin observes that Varanasi has the unique tradition where many Hindu families join their Muslim brethren in observing fast during Muharram.

The tazia, according to Syed Sibtul Hasan Fazil-e-Haswi, is a contribution from Timur who became a fan of the Indian rath (chariot), the stately carriage drawn by horses with its grand tapering pointed top and lenticular projections. Timur carried with him relics of Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) including a lock of hair, manuscripts of the Quran used by Imam Hussain and Imam Sali and a phial containing earth from the mound under which the mortal remains of Imam Hussain are interned. After Timur returned to Persia, it was the Sufi saints there who continued this tradition during Muharram processions, and this has come down to us as today's tazias.

An Italian artist Bruno Cabrini recreated scenes of Muharram processions with Tazias in the shape of the rathas during the 18th and 19th centuries in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra organised by Hindus. He has recorded his astonishment in his own words in 'Creation', the Venetian journal of art: "How come these Brahmins observe Muharram with such devotion and sincerity even though they are dedicated Hindus and do not permit slaughtering of any animal in the manner prescribed by Islam?!" The Hindu rulers of Vijayanagar during the 16th and 17th centuries even donned blackened garments and helped to arrange the Kala Tazia processions. Even the Scindias of Gwalior and the Holkar Maharajas of Indore conducted Majlis or Muharram congregations. In Lucknow Hindus regularly join Muslims in the Azadari and Alum (mourning processions).

In the Muharram alums and nohas (mourning processions), the followers of Hazrat Imam Hussain beat their chests, heads and backs with sharp metallic chains to recreate and experience for themselves the physical tortures and mental anguish that Imam Hussain and his followers had faced, and cry out: 'Hai Hussain, Hai Hussain'. The scene is so moving that it melts even the hardest and most obdurate of hearts.

The Sufi saints of India along with the Shi'ite ulema encouraged the mixing and merging of indigenous elements from the rich cultural heritage of the land to that of Muharram thus proclaiming the message of peaceful co-existence among communities and united resistance to tyrannical authority.

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