

Muharram A Retrospect the Undying Light of Karbala & Its Sacred Echo in the Kingdom of Oudh

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Abstract

The Islamic calendar commences with a month which witnessed the most heart-rending tragedy ever visited upon humankind upon this mortal earth. This was no ordinary calamity wrought by the indifferent forces of nature; it was a catastrophe of the profoundest moral and spiritual dimensions, inflicted with cold deliberation upon a family whose every member was, without exception, kind-hearted, generous, pious and possessed of a character without blemish - a family heavenly inspired by the noblest ideals ever cherished or dreamt of by mankind.

I. Prologue: The Month That Bears the Weight of Eternity

Dear Readers,

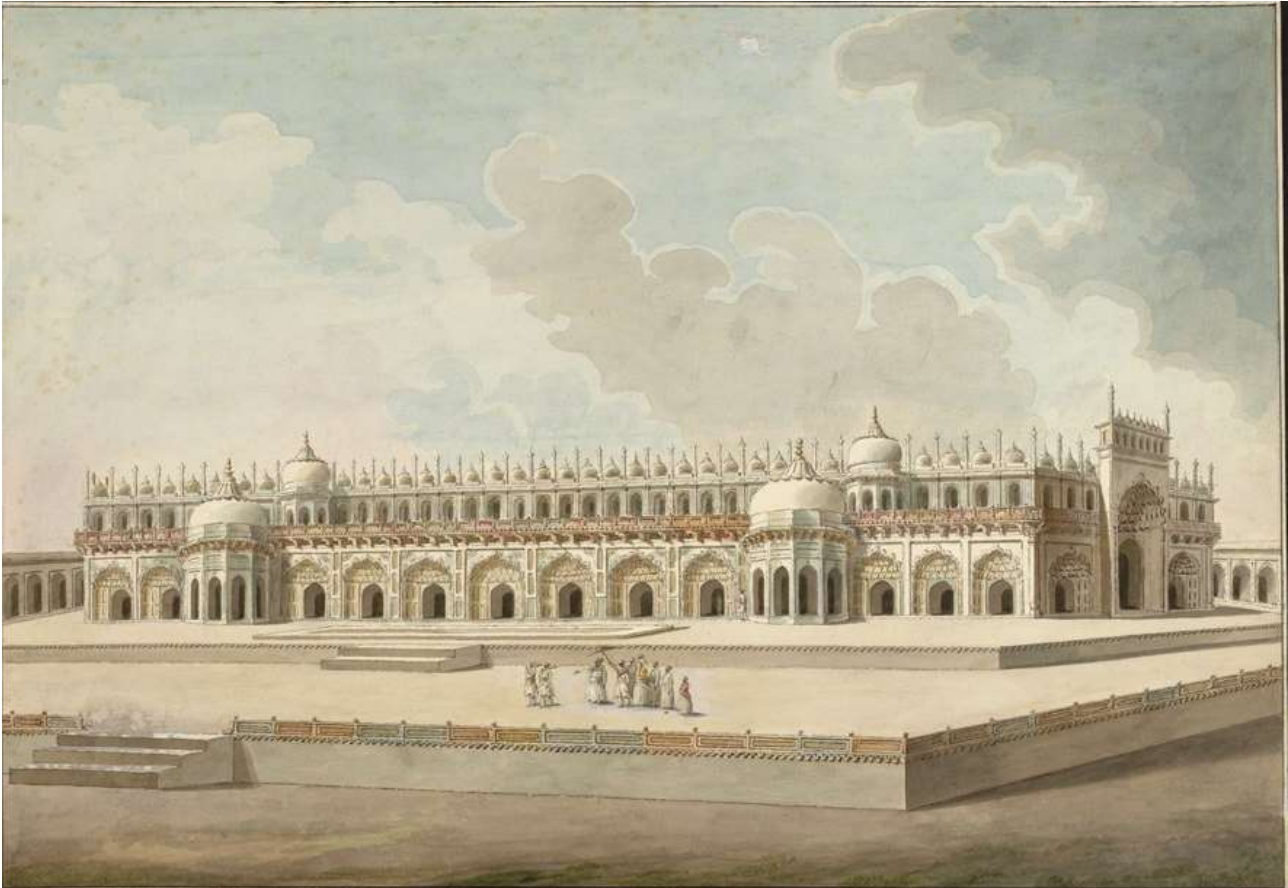
It might interest you to know, nay, it might move you to the very depths of your being, that the Islamic calendar commences with a month which witnessed the most heart-rending tragedy ever visited upon humankind upon this mortal earth. This was no ordinary calamity wrought by the indifferent forces of nature; it was a catastrophe of the profoundest moral and spiritual dimensions, inflicted with cold deliberation upon a family whose every member was, without exception, kind-hearted, generous, pious and possessed of a character without blemish - a family heavenly inspired by the noblest ideals ever cherished or dreamt of by mankind.

The family of whom we speak is none other than that of Imam Husain ibn Ali (peace be upon him), the beloved grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), he whom Almighty God had declared, through His beloved Messenger, to be the master of the youth of Paradise. Their fault - if it could be termed a fault, was singular, irreducible, and magnificent in its terrible simplicity: Husain's adamant refusal to bow, to submit, to render homage to an unjust and oppressive usurper who presumed to sit upon the throne of the Caliphate of Islam.

In tune with the eternal frailty of human nature, the vast majority of people had accepted the false claimant's tyrannical rule, some out of paralyzing fear, others for the sake of that filthy lucre whose poisonous allure has corroded the moral spines of men in every age and every land. The Holy Quran itself forewarns us of this perennial human weakness:

And what is it with you? You do not fight in the cause of Allah and for oppressed men, women, and children who cry out, "Our Lord! Deliver us from this land of oppressors! Appoint for us a saviour; appoint for us a helper-all by Your grace."

- The Holy Quran, Surah An-Nisa (4:75)



Bara Imambara, Lucknow. Built in 1784 CE by Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula as a house of mourning and a monument of compassion for his famine-stricken people.

Source: Watercolour of the Great Imambara of Asaf al-Daula, Lucknow, part of the Hyde collection by an anonymous artist working in the Murshidabad style in c. 1790-1800. Inscribed on the back in pencil and ink: 'Emaumbarree at Lucknow.'

II. Karbala: Where Heaven Wept and History Stood Still

The tragedy befell Imam Husain (peace be upon him) on the sun-scorched plains of Karbala, a place in what is now Iraq, in the year 680 of the Common Era - the tenth day of Muharram in the year 61 of the Hijri calendar, a day that the faithful have ever since called Ashura, from the Arabic for 'tenth,' a day that the very angels of the heavens have mourned with an inconsolable grief through the long centuries that have followed.

They were a handful of souls, a mere seventy-two companions, together with the sanctified women and children of the Prophet's household- the most pitifully ill-equipped of bands to give battle to an adversary, much less to withstand the onslaught of a conservatively estimated thirty-thousand strong, magnificently armed, and battle-hardened army despatched by one widely celebrated for tyranny, corruption and debauchery of the most reprehensible kind: Yazid ibn Muawiya, who nonetheless draped himself in the mantle of Islam's leadership.

The disparity between the forces arrayed upon that terrible field admits of no adequate description in the

language of military statistics alone. It was a wholly unequal combat in every conceivable dimension: in numbers, in weaponry, in provision of water and sustenance. For three days before the final engagement, the forces of Yazid had sealed off the waters of the Euphrates, denying even a single drop to the children of the Prophet's household. Husain's band of seventy-two souls- old men, young men, and mere boys among them - were rendered parched and famished before ever a sword was raised.

When the inevitable massacre came, it was carried out with a brutality so unprecedented, so shocking in its calculated cruelty, that even many contemporaries who had no special love for Husain's cause recoiled in horror. After the martyrdom of the menfolk, the women and children were subjected to heartless plunder, bound in chains, and driven across the searing desert to the court of the usurper in Damascus, there to be displayed as trophies of a 'victory' that has ever since stood as the most shameful monument to the triumph of power over principle.

Death with dignity is better than a life of humiliation. I shall never give my hand to you like a man who has been humiliated, nor shall I flee like a slave. I have not risen to spread evil or to show off, but to seek the reform of the Ummah of my grandfather. I want to enjoin good and forbid evil.

- Imam Husain ibn Ali (A.S.), at the Plains of Karbala, 680 CE



The Holy Shrine of Imam Husain (A.S.) at Karbala, Iraq. Visited annually by tens of millions of pilgrims - a testament to the eternal triumph of conscience over tyranny.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imam_Husayn_Shrine#/media/File:Karbala.jpg

III. The Sacred Meaning of Husain's Refusal: A Universal Message

The significance of Karbala surpasses the boundaries of religious denomination, of epoch and of geography. At its irreducible core burns a message as luminous and as urgent today as it was fourteen

centuries past: that the human soul, when it has been truly illuminated by the divine light of conscience, cannot and must not bow before tyranny - not even when the price of that refusal is the supreme sacrifice of life itself, of one's dearest kindred, of every earthly comfort and possession.

I learned from Husain how to achieve victory while being oppressed. If I had an army like the 72 soldiers of Husain, I would have won freedom for India in 24 hours.

- Mahatma Gandhi, 'Young India', 1924



The Muharram Procession in Lucknow, Kingdom of Oudh, 19th Century. The Nawabs of Oudh elevated the commemoration of Karbala into an art of unparalleled communal lamentation.

IV. The Verdict of the World's Scholars and Thinkers

The tragedy of Karbala has not been allowed to slumber in the archives of sectarian remembrance. Across the centuries, scholars, historians, philosophers, poets and statesmen of every tradition - Muslim and non-Muslim alike - have felt compelled to bear witness to its enduring significance.

A reminder of the blood-stained field of Karbala, where the grandson of the Apostle of God fell at length, tortured by thirst and surrounded by the bodies of his murdered kinsmen, has been at any time since then sufficient to evoke, even in the most lukewarm and heedless, the deepest emotions, the most frantic grief, and an exaltation of spirit before which pain, danger and death shrink to unconsidered trifles.

- Prof. Edward G. Browne, Cambridge University, 'A Literary History of Persia' (1919)

V. The Nawabs of Oudh: Custodians of Karbala's Living Memory



Muharram, Majlis at Lucknow

If the flame of Karbala has burned with a peculiar and ineffable brightness upon the Indian subcontinent, it is in no small measure owing to the munificence, the piety, and the extraordinary cultural patronage of the Nawabs and later Kings of Oudh, that magnificent dynasty of Shia sovereigns whose capital of Lucknow became, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the undisputed cultural and spiritual capital of Shia Islam in South Asia, and whose Muharram observances elevated the commemoration of Karbala into an art form of the very highest order.

The Nawabs of Oudh - from the founder Saadat Khan Burhan-ul-Mulk to the last and most poetically gifted Wajid Ali Shah - were men of profound Shia conviction. Their rule, commencing in 1722 and lasting until the ruthless British annexation of 1856, witnessed the transformation of Lucknow from a provincial town into a city of incomparable architectural splendour, literary refinement and religious observance. At the centre of this transformation stood Muharram, not merely as a religious duty but as the very heartbeat of the Oudhi civilisation.

Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula (r. 1775–1797): Architect of the Grand Imambara**Nawab Asaf ud Daulah- 1775-1797**

No figure in the story of Muharram in India looms larger than Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula, fourth Nawab of Oudh, who in 1784 commissioned the construction of what stands to this day as one of the most magnificent structures ever raised upon Indian soil: the Bara Imambara of Lucknow - also known as the Asafi Imambara - in the Hussainabad quarter of the old city.

The circumstances of its construction are themselves a parable of enlightened benevolence. The region of Oudh had been afflicted by a devastating famine, and thousands of the Nawab's subjects faced destitution. In a gesture of breathtaking moral imagination, Asaf-ud-Daula conceived this magnificent Imambara not merely as an act of religious devotion but as a colossal programme of public relief - designed to provide employment and sustenance to subjects of every social station without distinction. During the day, common labourers worked upon the site; during the night, even the nobles of the court joined in secretly so as not to embarrass the poor by being seen alongside them in toil - an equality rarely practised in any age.

The master architect was the celebrated Hafiz Kifayat Ullah of Shahjahanabad, whose genius conceived a structure that staggers the imagination to this day. More than twenty thousand men laboured upon it for fourteen years. The central congregational hall is said to be the largest arched hall in the entire world, its monumental brick vault maintained without a single wooden beam or iron support, held in place by nothing more than the perfect mathematical interlocking of its bricks. Above winds the famous Bhul Bhulaiyya - a labyrinthine maze of nearly five hundred interconnected passages. The complex also houses the stately Asafi Mosque, the Shahi Baoli step-well, and the triumphal Rumi Darwaza - that soaring gateway of brick and stucco inspired by the ancient gates of Constantinople, which has become the very symbol of Lucknow herself.

Muhammad Ali Shah (r. 1837–1842): Builder of the Chhota Imambara

If the Bara Imambara is the monument of a Nawab's piety expressed through grandeur of scale, the Chhota Imambara - formally known as the Imambara Hussainabad Mubarak - is the monument of a king's piety expressed through a ravishing and almost otherworldly beauty of ornamentation. Commissioned by Muhammad Ali Shah, third King of Oudh, in 1839, it stands in the Hussainabad locality as one of the most luminously beautiful religious buildings in all of India.

The Chhota Imambara has earned its popular sobriquet, the 'Palace of Lights,' through the breath-taking profusion of its chandeliers - hundreds of magnificent crystal and glass lamp-stands imported at enormous expense from the finest workshops of Belgium - which during the sacred nights of Muharram transform the interior into something that partakes more of the heavenly than of the earthly. The exterior is equally refined, adorned with Qur'anic verses rendered in the most exquisite Islamic calligraphy. Within its precincts stands the silver throne and the red crown of Ali Shah.



Chhota Imambara (Palace of Lights), Lucknow. Built by Muhammad Ali Shah, King of Oudh, 1839 CE. Adorned with hundreds of Belgian crystal chandeliers, it transforms into a vision of celestial beauty during Muharram.

Amjad Ali Shah (1842-1847) The “Hazrat” of Hazratganj

A pious, devoted and committed ruler, whose Mausoleum, Imambada Sibtainabad, where the King lies buried is a majestic masterpiece, which has been restored to its original form, by the Archaeological Survey of India, following a series of efforts and followups by the heritage enthusiast and Advocate SM Haider Rizvi, who was also the Mutawalli of the Wakf Imambada Sibtainabad from 2014 to 2022.



(Imambada Sibtainabad: Photograph Clicked by the Author)

Wajid Ali Shah (r. 1847–1856): The Poet-King's Eternal Lament

The last and most extraordinary of the Kings of Oudh was Wajid Ali Shah - a figure of such complex and luminous personality that no brief account could do him justice. Born in 1822, a poet of exquisite sensibility, a musician, a choreographer, a patron of every art the civilised world has known, Wajid Ali Shah was caricatured by the interested propaganda of the East India Company as a man lost in debauchery and unfit for rule. The truth was rather different: he was a man of exceptional cultural genius whose kingdom was coveted by an empire that had no scruple in manufacturing justifications for its appetite.

When the British annexed Oudh in 1856, the last King of Lucknow wept openly - as well he might, for what was being extinguished was not merely a kingdom but an entire civilisation. He was banished to Calcutta and installed at Matiyaburj (now Garden Reach), where he lived out the remainder of his days as a pensioner of the very power that had robbed him of his throne. Yet even in exile - even in the shadow of humiliation and dispossession that so eerily echoed the captivity of the women of Karbala after Ashura - Wajid Ali Shah did not abandon his devotion to Imam Husain.

He built at Matiyaburj an imambara of considerable beauty, and continued to observe the rituals of Muharram with the same solemn magnificence that had characterised the Lucknow court. He himself composed some of the most poignant marsiya - the elegiac poetry of Karbala in the Urdu language, and his personal lamentation for both the martyrs of Karbala and the lost paradise of Lucknow merged into a single, heartbreaking song of sorrow.



Wajid Ali Sha's Imambada at Matiya Burj, Kolkata (WB)

Source : <https://scroll.in/magazine/869214/the-series-of-events-that-began-with-a-king-falling-sick-and-ended-with-a-mini-lucknow-in-calcutta>

VI. Beyond the Crescent: The Participation of Hindu Adherents

One of the most extraordinary and insufficiently celebrated aspects of the Muharram tradition in the Kingdom of Oudh is the profound and genuine participation of the Hindu population in its observances. This was not a superficial gesture of neighbourly tolerance; it was a deep, heartfelt involvement that testified to the universal human resonance of the Karbala narrative and to the remarkable syncretic culture that the Nawabs had fostered in their capital.

After the enthronement of Ghazi-ud-Din Haider, two Hindus- Chunnu Lal Dilgeer and Natthu Lal raised splendid Imambaras in Lucknow. Jhunnu Lal, brother of Raja Jhau Lal, bore the poetic sobriquet *Dilgeer* and composed marsiyas of rare excellence; Though his residence near Tiraha Nakhas is recorded by Agha Mehndi, the site of his Imambara remains veiled in obscurity.

Natthu Lal, a contractor of that reign, erected the *Rauza Jannat-ul-Baqi* and an Imambara at Talkatora, crowned with a stately dome, adorned with Qur'anic inscriptions and the sacred names of the Panjatan. Within gleamed two resplendent metallic *Zaris* and treasured relics such as the *Panjas of Alams*. So esteemed was this sanctuary that Nawab Wajid Ali Shah himself is said to have recited a freshly composed marsiya therein. Yet, after Natthu Lal's demise, his heir dispersed the relics, departed to Bombay, and alienated the lands. In 1897 Nawab Zaki Husain Khan Bahadur assumed possession, his family and later an Anjuman tending its affairs. Alas, neglect overtook the shrine, and where once the Imambara stood, now rises but a common dwelling.

Mewa Ram, a Hindu, served as Diwan to King Nasiruddin Haider and was, as the historian Dr. Safdar Husaini records in his authoritative **Lucknow ki Tahzibi Miras** - a great and devoted follower of Imam Husain. He constructed his own imambara and arranged elaborate Taziadari at his residence. Nandu Ji, another Hindu devotee, built an imambara in Mansur Nagar during the reign of King Wajid Ali Shah.



Rauza e Kazmain, Lucknow , constructed by **Jagannath Agarwal**, a local businessman during the rule of **Nawab Amjad Ali Shah**

Source: The lucknow Album, containing a series of fifty photographic views of lucknow and its environs by Darogha Ubbas Ali.

During Muharram, people from all walks of life, including a very large proportion of Lucknow's Hindu population, many of them known as “Husaini Brahmans” would set up stalls around the Imambaras, offering water and refreshments to the mourners by day and by night, an act of conscious service in remembrance of the thirst that Husain and his companions had endured at Karbala. Even the intricate tazias, elaborate constructions which serve as representations of the shrine of Imam Husain were, and are in many instances made by Hindu craftsmen, a tradition that continues to this day.

Even the seemingly impossible - Muharram and Holi falling on the same day - revealed the depth of this communal bond. Around 1850, when this occurred during the reign of Wajid Ali Shah, the Hindus of Lucknow spontaneously decided not to celebrate Holi out of respect for the Muslim mourners. When the Nawab learnt of this, he was deeply moved, and declared that it was equally the duty of Muslims to respect their Hindu brethren's festival - and so both communities celebrated together, in a spirit of joy and sorrow intertwined, on the very same day.

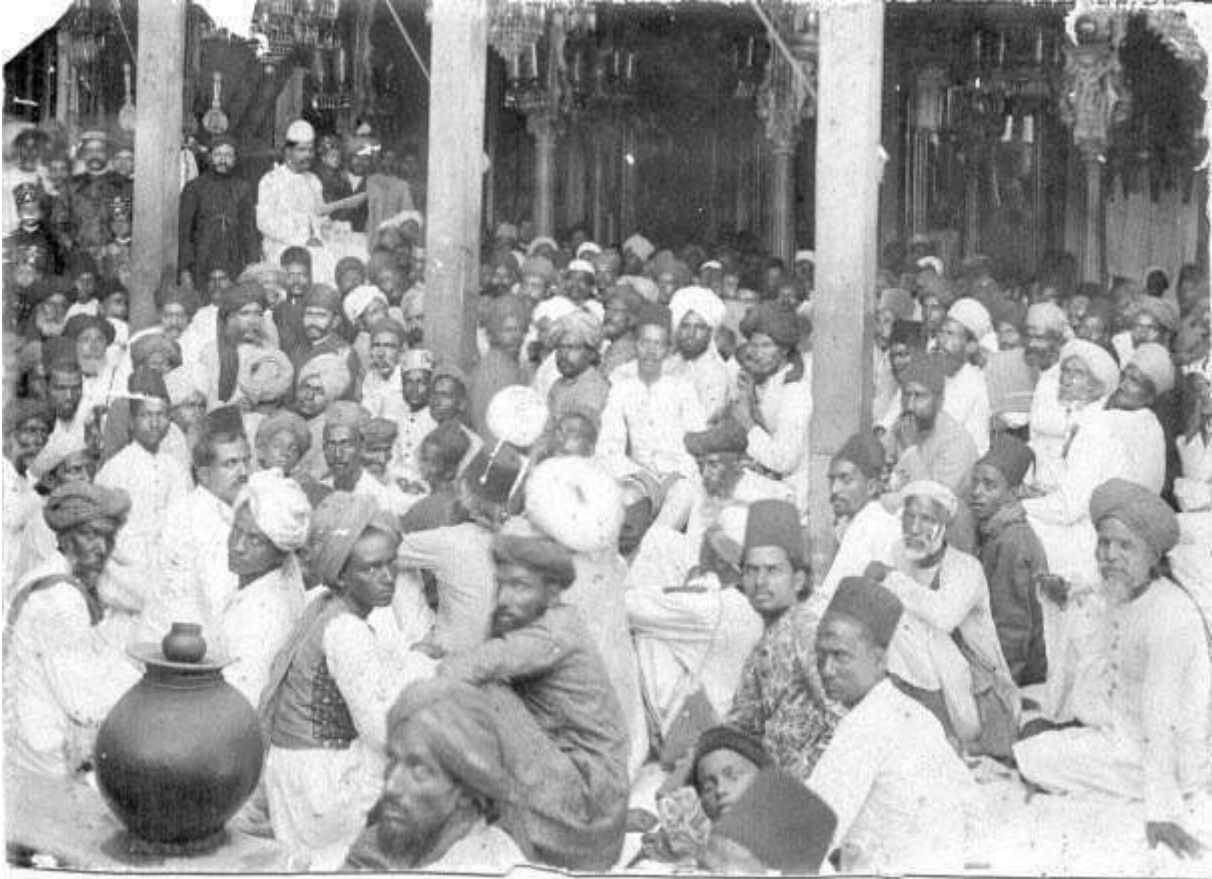
VII. The Arts of Lamentation: The Aesthetic Traditions of Azadari in Oudh



Muharram Procession, Lucknow

The Nawabs of Oudh were not content merely to build magnificent imambaras and distribute the revenues of their treasury upon the observances of Muharram; they were active and creative patrons of the extraordinary arts of lamentation that had grown up around the memory of Karbala. Under their royal nurture, these arts reached heights of refinement and expressiveness that have never since been surpassed. The marsiya, the elaborate elegiac poem dedicated to the Imam and the martyrs of Karbala - found its supreme practitioners in Oudh. The great marsiya poets Mir Babar Ali Anis (1802-1874) and Mirza Salamat Ali Dabeer (1803-1875) are considered the twin peaks of this extraordinary literary form, and both flourished under the patronage of the Oudh court. Their marsiya poems - running sometimes to hundreds of verses, combining the grandeur of the epic with the intimacy of the lyric, the precision of

reportage with the soaring flight of spiritual meditation ,constitute perhaps the single greatest body of religious poetry in the Urdu language.



Mir Anis reciting a Marsiya in Hyderabad, 1871,

Source :

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/Mir_Anees_in_Hyderabad_in_1871_reciting_marsiya.jpg

The nauha , the shorter, more immediately emotional lyric of lamentation provided the poetic and rhythmic accompaniment to the Muharram processions. The majlis the mourning assembly - brought together hundreds, sometimes thousands of people in the great imambaras and private houses of Lucknow to hear learned zakirs (orators) expound the events of Karbala with a narrative skill that reduced entire congregations to tears. And the tazia processions themselves - magnificent representations of the Imam's tomb carried through the streets by tens of thousands of mourners, were spectacles of extraordinary splendour unique to the culture of Oudh.



Muharram Procession, Lucknow

*Maidaan mein jab riyaaze Hussaini khizaan huwa
Dunya se kaarwaan Shahe deen ka rawaan huwa
Darya e khoon mein gharq har ek naujawaan huwa
Hamshakle Mustafa bhi shaheedey sinaan huwa
Rotey thay Shaah lasho mein tanha khade huwe
Thay khaak par kaleje ke tukde padey huwe.*

Mir Babar Ali Anis, Marsiya - On the Morning of Ashura

VIII. The Everlasting Message: What Karbala Says to the Twenty-First Century

Dear Readers, we find ourselves now upon the shores of the twenty-first century, an age in which the names of the oppressors have changed but the nature of oppression remains constant; in which the instruments of tyranny have grown infinitely more sophisticated but the spirit of resistance has not been extinguished. It is in this context that the message of Karbala speaks with a freshness and an urgency that the centuries have not diminished but rather intensified.

The message is this: that human dignity is not negotiable. That injustice cannot be legitimised by power, however overwhelming. That the conscience of a truly free human soul cannot be compelled to call falsehood truth, or tyranny justice, or oppression the will of God. That there is a dimension of the human spirit - the dimension that Husain exemplified and that Karbala has enshrined - before which the largest armies and the most absolute of earthly powers are ultimately powerless.

Do not be a slave of others when God has created you free. The greatest victory is the one achieved over self - over fear, over greed, over the temptation to submit to what the conscience knows to be wrong.

- Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (A.S.), 'Nahj al-Balagha'

IX. The Triumph That Outlasts the Tyrant

We recall, with a just and enduring pride, that while no man living can point to the grave of Yazid the usurper, while the dynasty that ordered the massacre of Karbala has vanished from the face of the earth without leaving a single memorial that any soul visits in love or in reverence, the holy shrine of Imam Husain (peace be upon him) in Karbala stands to this day as one of the most visited pilgrimage sites upon the entire globe.

Each year, upon the anniversary of Ashura, and during Arbäeen, tens of millions of human beings - from every continent, from every walk of life, speaking a hundred languages - make their way to the plains of Karbala to stand before the golden dome of the Imam's shrine and pay their obeisance and respects to the Martyr of Humanity, the Shaheed-e Insaniyat Imam Husain (may peace be upon him). The great Arbäeen pilgrimage - held forty days after Ashura - has in recent years drawn estimated crowds of twenty to thirty million people in a single day, making it the largest annual human gathering anywhere on earth. The powers of this world, with all their armies and all their apparatus of coercion, cannot match this testimony of freely given love.

X. Epilogue: The Lamp That Cannot Be Extinguished

May the supreme sacrifice of Imam Husain, his noble family and his loyal companions, who went to the embrace of martyrdom not with reluctance or resignation but with a luminous acceptance born of the certainty that some causes are greater than life itself, may this sacrifice keep guiding humankind forever: to remain undeterred and steadfast even amidst the worst of adversities; to refuse, with every breath that God has given us, to bend the knee before injustice and tyranny; to remember that the soul of a truly free human being is unconquerable.

The Islamic New Year begins, therefore, not with celebration but with lamentation, not because Islam is a faith of sorrow, but because it is a faith of conscience; and a conscience that is truly alive cannot contemplate the events of Karbala without weeping. That weeping, however, is not the weeping of defeat.

It is the weeping of those who have looked upon the highest reaches of human possibility - of courage, of fidelity, of love - and been overwhelmed.

Jab Bhi Zameer-o-zarf ka sauda ho doston,

Qayam raho Husain ke Inkaar ki tarah.

(Whenever there is a test of conscience and character, my friends,
Stand firm like the resolute defiance of Husain)

(Ahmad Faraz)

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