**Death in Islam: The Hawkes Bay Case (Part III)**

[Akbar S Ahmed](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/akbar-s-ahmed/)

June 30, 2022

Those who believed in the miracles immediately agreed to the proposition. Willayat was the first to agree: he would lead the party. There was no debate, no vacillation. They would walk into the sea at Karachi and their faith would take them to the holy city of Karbala. Since revelations began, Willayat had spent about half a million rupees and had disposed of almost all his property. He now quickly disposed of what remained to pay for the pilgrimage. The party consisted of 42 people, whose ages ranged from 80 years to four months. 17 of them were from Mureed and most of the remaining were related. Willayat, his brother and his cousin, distributed all of their belongings, retaining one pair of black clothes (symbolic of mourning) only. They hired trucks to take them to Karachi. With them were six large wooden and tin trunks. They also took with them the Shiah symbols of martyrdom at Karbala: alam (flag), taboot (picture of the mourning procession), jhoola (swing), and shabi (picture of the holy images).

Stopping over at shrines for prayers in Lahore and Multan, they arrived in Karachi on the third day. Karachi was in the throes of anti-government demonstrations and the police had imposed a curfew. The tension in the city directly reflected the rivalry between Shiahs and Sunnis in Pakistan. Despite this, the party was not stopped as they made their way to Hawkes Bay. For them, this was another miracle. At Hawkes Bay, the party offered two prayers (nafil) and read ten Surahs from the Holy Quran, including Al-Qadr, an early Meccan Surah, which states, “the Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months.” The verse was well chosen: for the party, it was indeed the night of destiny.

Under complex pressures, religion is the most convenient straw to clutch.

Then, the Imam issued final instructions to Naseem: the women and children were to be locked in the six trunks and the virgin girls were to sit with her in one of them. Willayat was asked to hold the taboot along with three other men. Willayat’s cousin, Mushtaq, was appointed chief (salar) of the party. He was ordered to lock the trunks, push them into the sea and throw away the keys. He would then walk into the water with an alam. At this stage, four young people from Mureed, two men and two girls became frightened. This fear, too, “was put in their hearts by the Imam.” Naseem, therefore, willingly exempted them from the journey. The remaining 38 entered the sea. Mothers saw children and children saw old parents descending into the dark waters. But there “were no ah (cries) or ansoo (tears).” Those in five out of the six trunks died. One of the trunks was shattered by the waves and its passengers survived. Those on foot also survived; they were thrown back onto the beach by the waves. The operation, which had begun in the late hours of the night, was over by the early morning when police and the press reached Hawkes Bay. The survivors were in high spirits. There was neither regret nor remorse among them. Only a divine calm, a deep ecstasy.

The Karachi police, in a display of bureaucratic zeal, arrested the survivors. They were charged with attempting to leave the country without visas. The official version read: “The incharge, FIA Passport Cell, in an application filed in the court said, it was reliably learnt that one Willayat Hussain Shah, resident of Chakwal, along with his family had attempted to proceed to a foreign country “Iraq” without valid documents through illegal route i.e. Hawkes Bay beach.” The act came within the offence punishable under section 3/4 of the Passport Act 1974. The accused were, however, soon released.

Rich Shiahs, impressed by the devotion of the survivors, paid for their journey by air for a week to and from Karbala. In Iraq, influential Shiahs, equally impressed, presented them with gifts, including rare copies of the Holy Quran. Naseem’s promise that they would visit Karbala without worldly means was fulfilled.

Social change, leadership and kinship in Chakwal society: In an attempt to find a sociological explanation of the Hawkes Bay case, I shall begin by putting forward a thesis based on the Dubai Chalo (let’s go to Dubai), theme in Pakistan society. Briefly, the thesis suggests that Pakistani workers, returning from the Arab lands with their pockets full of money, are no longer prepared to accept the status quo of the social order from which they had escaped. Those who return demand more social status and authority in society. In their own eyes, they have earned the right to be respected by their long and usually hard period abroad. But they may have little idea how exactly to go about changing society, or even whether they wish to move it “forward” or back to older, more traditional, ways. Their new social confidence, backed by economic wealth and combined with frustration at the slow pace of change, may result in tensions and dramatic developments of which the Hawkes Bay case is an example.

Consider Willayat Shah. Belonging to the junior lineage of a Shiah family and with a Sunni wife, he escaped to Arabia determined, it may be assumed, to make good on his return. After four hard years there, he returned with considerable wealth, but society had remained the same and there was no perceptible change in his social position. Willayat’s immediate family were acutely aware of his predicament. His closest child and eldest daughter, fully grown and intelligent, and herself under pressure to get married, responded to the crisis in their lives with a series of dramatic, divine pronouncements. In her case, the social crisis had triggered psychological reactions. The revelations were calculated to disturb the social equations of the village forever. Naseem dominated not only the social but also, and more importantly for the family, the religious life of the area. Willayat Shah had finally arrived. Both he and Naseem now reached out towards the better, truer world that, for Muslims, lies beyond death. Through their deaths, they would gain an ascendancy, which would be final and unassailable. They would triumph through the Shiah themes of death, martyrdom and sacrifice.

For the actors in our case, the society provided the stress but failed to suggest cures. We know that at least four individuals closely related to the key actor, Naseem, suffered from tension due to mixed loyalties in the Shiah-Sunni lineup: her grandmother, her mother, her uncle and her aunt’s husband were rumoured to have been Sunni in the past. It was known that her grandmother’s family were Sunni. By assuming the role of Shiah medium, Naseem was socially compensating for the Sunni connexions in her family. Under such complex pressures, religion is the most convenient straw to clutch. The stress, thus, assumes a form of illness, but the illness is both mental and physical and “in its expression culturally patterned.” One must look for cultural acts and symbolic forms, which have local significance, including sacrifice and martyrdom. The religious sociology of Chakwal Tehsil certainly patterns this case.

Willayat Shah compared the sacrifice of his family to that of Karbala because “he and his group had been assigned a duty to save the religion and the faith.” In an interview given to Tariq Aziz on Pakistan Television, he explained why Karachi was selected. He could have died in a pond in the village, he said. But the world would not have known of their faith. The prediction of his daughter had, indeed, come true. The world was amazed at the miracle of Hawkes Bay and people would talk of them as martyrs forever. Throughout the interviews, he remained proud and unrepentant. His perception of those hours at Hawkes Bay is revealing. He “insisted that he had been walking on the sea all the while like a truck driving on flat road.” He felt no fear, no regret. Most significantly, he remained convinced that the revelations would continue, even after the death of Naseem, through a male member of the family. Willayat’s wife, Sardar Bibi, reacted with a fervour equal to that of her husband. “If the Imam tells us to sacrifice this baby too,” she said pointing to an infant she was feeding during an interview, “I’ll do it.”

(To be Continued)

*The writer is Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies (School of International Service, American University, Washington, DC) and a Wilson Center Global Fellow.*

n