

Karbala: The abiding counter-point

Wisdom lies in opting for a path that promises to actually advance the cause you espouse, that avoids unnecessary confrontation and does not cause death of the innocent



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To understand the real legacy of Karbala, it is necessary to go beyond the tragic events of this extremely significant event of human history, that involved the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad (AS). Remembering the tragedy is necessary too. It helps establish deep links with the key figures including Imam Hussain (AS) and his inspiring and fearless sister Bibi Zainab, who stirs our sensibilities so often dulled by the routine pressures of life. The tragedy of Karbala has produced one of the most powerful narratives of human history.

Initially blocked by the opponents of Imam Hussain, the narrative subsequently travelled endlessly by retaining its inspirational and emotive power almost a hundred years after it occurred. Karbala has been marked for eternity. And with it the glorification of the best that history has witnessed in the human race of endurance and of character.

Hence the abiding engagement of Karbala for people flows from not only the sentiment that draws them, but also the indivisibility and the integrity of the human being, that makes certain that values and practice of ultimate principles of being attract them. Four are noteworthy. One sums them all up. At Karbala the Prophet's family very convincingly

demonstrated that the ultimate human greatness flows from the power of one's character that commands the strength to confront any adversity when confrontation is thrust upon you.

If there are events in history that convincingly separated the heroes, the ashraf makhluqaat, the superior-most creation of Allah, from the rest, it was at Karbala where Imam Hussain and his family showed sterling character in the face of the gravest provocation and pain. At Karbala, Imam Hussain and his family, in making the choices they made, also practically displayed the rights and obligations of relationships in times of peace and in times of crisis. In his treatment of his children, sister, wife, friends and even his enemies, the Imam proved the beauty of the Holy Quran as the provider of a very convincing code of ethics to regulate human relationships.

Two, at Karbala Imam Hussain also highlighted the principle of effectiveness as one that must determine the appropriate mode of struggle at a given stage. Wisdom lies in opting for a path that promises to actually advance the cause you espouse, that avoids unnecessary confrontation and does not cause death of the innocent. Imam Hussain accordingly opted not to battle with Yazid when he first asked for the Imam's baya'at.

Confronted with Yazid commanding an organized army, the possibility of further driving violent divisions within a relatively new religion and hopeful that he would have the space to spread the message of Allah, Imam Hussain merely declined to

accept Yazid's allegiance. For him war was not on the cards. But when Yazid denied Imam Hussain all the space, demanded his bayaa't, and compelled him to compromise with his beliefs and convictions, Imam Hussain knew confrontation had been imposed on him. Retreat would mean abandoning ideals, altering one's qibla, and killing the human spirit. And then followed the most asymmetrical battle known to the human race — the battle of Karbala — only seventy — two against Yazid's army of thousands.

In fighting the battle thrust upon him, Imam Hussain showed that personal inflexibility on values and principles, and personal willingness to sacrifice was a requirement of those who are located or locate themselves within the context of power and authority. Yet contrasting with this inflexibility on the personal front is also the necessity for flexibility. Flexibility is often the hallmark of successful engagement with people and power. Flexibility must be embraced to effect change; it increases avenues for engagement and hence change.

The question of appropriate modes of struggle has never been more relevant than it is now. Anger and aggression come easy in this highly conflictual world. Breaking away from the reactive path poses the real challenge. Imam Hussain opted away from a reactive confrontation until it was imposed on him.

There is no concept of a just war in Islam. The responsibility of balancing between the Quranic injunction not to kill even one innocent, since it would amount

to killing the entire humanity, and between killing for self-defence rests on us. Islam's stress as in the Quran was illustrated through the Prophet's own life, that Islam's foremost requirement of its followers is to become the best; to be the 'stars' for which the Quran lays down a code of ethics. Islam undoubtedly requires personal reformation, to win the fight within, to optimise the qualities granted to human beings. Only through character formation can the message of Islam be effectively transmitted and a life be well lived.

The third important principle is never let the spirit die, never give up what nourishes the spirit... your ideals. They nurture the soul, enrich the spirit and direct the mind. God Himself attested to the greatness of his human creation. Man was designated God's most prized, most respected among his living creations.

What distinguishes human beings from the rest is man's spirit — the core of 'being' and man's living link to God. An enriched and intact spirit is the most prized of human assets. It has the capacity to enable the human race to reach out for the intangibles and lift the level of existence. The spirit determines, dares and declares in the human pursuit for individual and collective goodness. Conversely, broken and mutilated spirits cause endless human casualties. A human spirit intact, promoting values, is a necessary pre-requisite for a rational world. After all, ultimately it is around the swivel of values that the human civilization connects. Yet the trajectory of human

progress has proceeded along the mind zones. The spirit is subdued and deprived. In many spaces the hungry spirit is on the war path.

Four, and perhaps the most powerful requirement identified at Karbala, was that of a revolutionary recasting of authoritative power, in content, in practice and hence in public perception. Imam Hussain's struggle was an attempt to humanize power, to align it to the gentle spirit of humanity. The nature and exercise of power has remained unchanged through the centuries. Yet the struggle against 'unfair' power remains an abiding one. The spirit of compassion and of fair-play can alter the nature of power. A conscious human race today understands on a mass scale the compulsions of fair play and of compassion. The state of the world today requires a renaissance; one that will redefine the culture of power and politics veering it towards humanism that cuts across all religions and ideologies.

The world has been hit by unprecedented calamity; the mountains, the seabeds, the land and the atmosphere rattled by earthquakes, tsunami, cyclones, snowstorms and floods. All this has so emphatically demonstrated the utter fragility of being. And after all, against the utter fragility of being this is not such a hard message to comprehend. When the being is so fragile, only the intangible spirit remains the abiding reality. And for the spirit the lessons of Karbala offer the most abiding lessons.