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**Remembering Karbala**

The Islamic new year began on Tuesday, as usual on a deeply sombre note. Muharram – the first month of the Islamic calendar – also revives grim memories of the massacre of Imam Hussain (a.s.), Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) grandson and 72 of his followers, all brutally martyred at Karbala in southern Iraq, by the army of Yazid Ibne Muawiya, the Umayyad ruler of the time.

The tragedy of Karbala, which is now more than 1400 years old, has been vividly remembered year after year, bearing testimony to its unusually unique character in global history. Unlike other memorable events which lost their appeal over time, the tragedy of Karbala remains fresh as it works to inspire Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

On the day of ‘Ashura’ – the 10th day of Muharram – Imam Hussain (a.s.), the son of Hazrat Ali (a.s.) and Bibi Fatima (a.s.), stood before the army of Yazid for one last time to persuade them to step back from their planned massacre.

It was an unusually bold gesture which came with a message of compassion, all surrounded by very adverse circumstances that remain unmatched either before or after the epic tragedy at Karbala. Unperturbed by the presence of anywhere between 30 thousand and 70 thousand soldiers in Karbala under Yazid’s banner, Imam Hussain eloquently spoke in his defence.

“Do not make haste to kill me so that I may tell you what I must”, announced Imam Hussain (a.s.) in his last sermon as he spoke of his status as the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) while narrating the many qualities of his household. In that message, Imam Hussain also spoke of his refusal to pledge allegiance to Yazid, irrespective of the consequences.

To this day, Imam Hussain (a.s.) remains the symbol of defiance in the face of odds, notably for those seeking justice around the world. It is hardly surprising that defiant Muslims in hotspots like Kashmir or Palestine have repeatedly found refuge in the example of Imam Hussain (a.s.) and his followers.

So powerful was the impact of Imam Hussain as a larger than life figure that Hur Ibne Riyahi, a prominent general from Yazid’s army was swayed to abandon his master and cross over to join Imam Hussain before the final battle at Karbala. To this day, Hur ibne Riyahi is widely remembered as the same figure who blocked Imam Hussain (a.s.) and his followers from continuing their journey beyond Karbala, after enduring a long and tiring trip from Medina to Makkah in present-day Saudi Arabia to southern Iraq.

But his choice of crossing over to support Imam Hussain (a.s.) and his followers has ensured a position of enduring respect as obvious from the scores of pilgrims who regularly visit the shrine of Hur Ibne Riyahi in Karbala.

As the day of the battle in Karbala progressed, the victims who ranged from the elderly to the infant Hazrat Ali Asghar (a.s.) – the six-month-old son of Imam Hussain – were all martyred brutally. And even after the able-bodied men accompanying Imam Hussain (a.s.) were martyred, nightfall came with further tragedy as Yazid’s soldiers burnt the tents that housed the women and children left behind.

In the subsequent weeks and months, the widows and children of Karbala were taken first to the court of Ubaidullah Ibne Ziyad, the governor of Kufa and a Yazid loyalist, before appearing at the court of Yazid in Damascus. But Yazid’s empire began to face a backlash that eventually brought down the most draconian rule in Islamic history.

Historical records show that Yazid’s empire came crashing down just three years later when he died under mysterious circumstances. Visitors to Damascus today do not find any trace of his final resting place. With his death, Yazid’s rule found no continuation when his son, Muawiya Ibne Yazid, quietly abdicated shortly after succeeding his father.

The remembrance of Imam Hussain (a.s.) and his followers in the coming days, notably on 10th Muharram, serves to reinforce a powerful message that has been repeated time and again since the massacre at Karbala: that empires built upon tyranny and bloodshed can not endure. Today, that powerful lesson serves to inspire individuals and communities worldwide as they struggle against odds and draw inspiration from an event 1400 years ago.

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