Banaras Muharram and the Coals of Karbala

DVD Chapters 1 - 36

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Despite Husayn’s repeated attempts to speak of peace and avert disaster, the slaughter could not be stopped. The family members of the Prophet and their friends did not want war. But they met their attackers bravely, fought and fell, one after one. Two small boys, seven and nine years old, were forced to fight for their lives and were killed. They were the sons of Husayn’s sister, Zaynab, and great grandsons of the Prophet. Ali Akbhar, Husayn’s eldest son died in his father’s arms. Another martyr was a close Christian friend of Husayn. It is said that his head was thrown at his weeping wife. She picked up a stick, faced the soldiers and was also killed.

Last of the men in his company, Husayn is said to have fought gallantly to protect the remaining women and children. He too fell and was beheaded.

The rider less horse of Husayn, was riddled with the arrows while faithfully attempting to protect the fallen master. The rider less horse symbolizes Husayn and the unwavering devotion of the martyrs of Karbala.

(5) In India, those martyred at Karbala are today revered by most Muslims, Shia and Sunni alike. In the Holy City of Banaras, even the Hindu community will show their respect. For ten days at the start of the month of Muharram, the community collectively mourns through a series of rituals. Young men of faith symbolically vow: “Never again shall we raise our hands against our brethren!” A pact of faith is sealed as these young men of the community walk together in processions chanting the name of Husayn while synchronically slapping their breasts in mourning.

(6) Nawab Pyare Mirza Hasan, is one of the elders of the Shia community and the proprietor of an important community imambara --- a religious center housing the ritual implements of Muharram. Pyare Mirza Hasan plays a major role in his locality’s annual commemoration of Muharram. For instance, he leads the processional horse, the “dul dul” of Abbas. Nawab Hasan defines the Muharram as a manifestation for peace. He puts it this way: “the message is relevant for all religions, for all of Mankind. We remember the sacrifice of Husayn and his legacy of peace when we do the matam and beat our chests. We’re not threatening others!” The young processioners are not repelled by the blood which appears as they symbolically vow: “I will beat myself before I beat my brother! Never again Karbala!”
Fatepur Sikri, was the “Camelot” of Akbar’s Mughal Empire. Accomplished scholars from all traditions were welcomed to court and invited to actively participate in dialogue. Fatepur Sikri was most certainly a court of “color” and ethnic diversity --- a colloquy of thinkers from near and far. Sufi and Shia mystics, Hindu Brahmins, Jains, Zoroastrians and Christian clerics attended. The religious motifs of the world were blended in perfect unity. Akbar attempted to create a new religious vision of tolerance, known as 
*Din-I-Ilahi*, the “Divine Faith”, that which all men and women of religion could join.

The inclusion of Akbar’s faith is reflected in the architecture: The Palace of Birbal, named after the devout Hindu renowned as Akbar’s closest confident and chief minister, is suitably adorned with Hindu symbolism. The Emperor took a Hindu Rajput wife and built her a *yagyasthan* --- a temple for Vedic fire ceremonies. He also took a Christian wife and built her a church.

Music, dance and cultural endeavors found space alongside serious study and discourse. Akbar initiated a most progressive program for the translation of the great religious texts of the world. The most skilled Mughal artists were employed to create illustrations. Moses crossing the Red Sea. The Holy Mother of Christianity. Valmiki’s Sita winning her test of fire. The didactic fables of the Panchatantra. --- to name just several famous works.

(11) Though the religious tolerance and ecumenical spirit of the Mughal Court diminished after the death of Akbar, the spirit of his vision lives on. His palatial grave at Sikhandra, near Agra, symbolizes this heavenly vision --- a garden of peace and tranquillity.

For centuries the spirit of Akbar, at the tomb of Sikhandra, has been honored by Muslims and Hindus alike --- much in the same way as Akbar himself, made pilgrimage to the famous shrine of Ajmer, and honored the spirit of the 13th century Sufi Saint, Shaikh Moinuddin Chisti.

(12) Another leader of the Sufi order of Chisti, Shaykh Salim Chisti, predicted the birth of Akbar’s first son and heir to the Mughal throne. In the very center of the compound of the Great Mosque of Fatepur Sikri, Akbar rewarded the renowned Sufi by building a meditation chamber. After the death of Shayhk Salim Chisti, the chamber was converted into a splendid white marble shrine, a *mazar*, where the public approach, honor and petition the spirit of the Sufi saint.
(15) In such a city, it is not surprising to find the community united in an annual multi-ethnic commemoration of the martyrs of Karbala. More than honoring spiritual persons of the past and seeking their blessing, Banarasis emphasize that the underlying message of Muharram is universal: This is a manifestation for peace. Imam Husayn and the martyrs of Karbala, it is said, sacrificed themselves in the battle between good and evil. Mistakes in history, the tragedy of Karbala should not be repeated.

(16) In South Asia, the focal point of the Muharram, is a form of “mazar”, a model tomb of Imam Husayn, known as a “taziya”. Often artistic masterpieces, the taziya are portable. On two occasions, one of installation and one of closure, they are ceremoniously carried in procession throughout the neighborhood. There are two categories of taziya: “permanent” and “temporary”. “Permanent taziya” are constructed of wood and metal; often adorned with precious or semi-precious gems and metal. The “Ranga-ka-Taziya” of Banaras was established in 1759. Each year, prior to the Muharram, over 50 volunteers, mostly young people, work without pay for over a month, to renew the glittering pewter plating.

(17) “Temporary taziya” are made each year from paper and bamboo. After the ritual period of display, on the 10th day of Muharram they are taken in procession for either burial or immersion in the Ganges. Hundreds of these taziya will be displayed throughout the city in private and public courtyards during the first ten days of the Muharram.

(18) On the opposite bank of the Ganges is the palace of the Maharaja, the Hindu “King” of Banaras. The royal family annually donates to the commemoration and establishes one of the largest paper taziya produced in the city. The tradition is said to date back to the foundation of the present-day kingdom, the Kashi Raj, in the beginning of the 18th century. On the Assi Road in south Banaras, in the neighborhood of Shivala, another paper taziya has been annually established for generations by a Hindu family of the sweeper community.

(19) Around the taziya people gather, socially interact and recall the tragic events of Karbala. Many Hindus will respectfully touch the taziya, or cup their hands together in a gesture of respect, perhaps hoping to receive a blessing. According to recent police records a total of 437 taziya are registered in Banaras. The majority are said to be established by the Sunni community, constituting the majority of Muslims in the city.
Muharram the Shia majlis is performed twice a day --- morning and evening. The women first, then the men. Ten days of devotional performance reflect the importance and passion of the season.

(22) On some occasions, such as this death anniversary of an important member of the Shia community, well respected for his service to society, large gatherings for majlis will be held. Guest speakers and well-known reciters of noha are invited. At the Fatman Complex a comfortable room is arranged where the proceedings are televised for the women and small children.

The majlis, and the message of Karbala, are ritually repeated throughout the year, and forever in the heart.

REMEMBERING THE CHILDREN:

It is appropriate, in sharp contrast to the treatment of Husayn’s people at Karbala, that sweets and snacks are traditionally distributed at the conclusion of the majlis.

The suffering of the children at Karbala is remembered --- their starving, their thirst. During the Muharram, kindness is especially directed toward children.

(23) In many Sunni homes, the family women arrange sweets and dried fruits for the children. Each child receives a small homemade purse filled with treats. It is also common to invite neighborhood children for a glass of “sherbet”, a sweet milk drink spiced with cardamom, dried fruits and nuts. The children learn to appreciate their good fortune. And, they are reminded of the inexcusable behavior of the soldiers of Yazid who tormented the children at Karbala.

As word of the invitation gets around, children of the neighborhood scurry to get their treat. The moment is cheerful.

BE KIND TO YOUR NEIGHBORS:

(24) Another “good deed” in tune with the spirit of Muharram is the distribution of “kitchera”, a spicy lentil and rice stew. Neighbors of Sunni localities will spend the night of the 9th of Muharram preparing the tasty dish in huge pots. The next morning, each household receives a portion. Almost everybody takes part in this community meal.

The party of Husayn had been denied access to water, children had died. Throughout the Muharram, individuals, families and localities will piously arrange for the distribution of water or sherbet for everyone, especially for visitors to the taziya and participants in the many processions.
Ustad Bismillah Khan:

(28) Ustad Bismillah Khan, a Shia Muslim, first came to Banaras at the age of six. He came to study music with his maternal uncle, a grand master who played and taught the shahnai, a double reed woodwind instrument, at the compounds of several famous Hindu temples. Today, Bismillah Khan is the grand master, a recipient of the prestigious Bharat Ratna Award and one of the most celebrated musicians in all of India.

For many years, on the 8th of Muharram, Bismillah Khan would lead a procession of mourners from the central neighborhood of Dalmandi to the Shia burial ground of Fatima. Now, in old age, he greets the procession with a late night concert of sorrow, held at the Fatima compound and next to the symbolic tomb of Karbala. The audience is multi-ethnic. The message and medium, as Bismillah Khan has often said, is universal.

Banetith Akhara:

(29) In the early morning, in open spaces and parks throughout the city, sword and stick fighting clubs known as Banethi Akhara, are found practicing the ancient martial-art of “banethi”. There are both Hindu and Muslim clubs. The Chhannu Lal Akhara of Assi, in the southern sector of Banaras, is a predominantly Hindu group. The elders, Dinanath, Badrinath and his son Murari are well-known shopkeepers in the neighborhood. Together with younger members they annually perform in the processions of both the Ram Lila --- dramatizing the sword swinging Hindu Goddesses of the Ramayan; and the Muharram --- dramatizing the combat of Karbala. The Hindu akhara represents four generations of inter-cultural crossover, four generations of Hindu participation in the Banaras Muharram.
The *Dul Dul Jaluz*:

(31) The “*DUL DUL*”, are the faithful horses who tried to protect their masters, the martyrs of Karbala. These horses were shown no mercy by the soldiers of Yazid. Wounded, rider-less *dul dul* symbolize the spirit of the martyrs, the spirit of devotion and love.

The Shia of Shivala sponsor two “*dul dul jaluz*” --- horse-led processions. The first is held at night on the 8th of Muharram for Husayn’s half-brother Abbas, who died on the bank of the Euphrates attempting to retrieve water for the women and children. It is said that after filling his water bag Abbas told his horse to drink. But, knowing that the women and children desperately awaited water, the loyal horse refused.

The daytime procession on the 10th of Muharram, honors Imam Husayn.

The decoration of the ceremonial horse takes approximately one hour. Arrows are sewn onto a red stained sheet. Two swords, crossed and placed as a “saddle” over the horse’s back, symbolize either Abbas or Husayn. The horse is covered with a mantle of flowers. Lemons are placed on the tips of each sword --- often said to be symbols of empathy and tears. Sometimes the lemons are made of silver; donations from individuals who have made a vow of faith and feel that they have received reward and comfort through their devotion to Husayn.

Before the procession can begin, prayers will be chanted over the banners, whips and knives which will be used.

To carry the *alam*, the banners, is an honor. The red *alam* represents Husayn who was martyred in blood. A green *alam* represents his elder brother, Hasan, who was martyred by poison. The black and white striped *alam* represents the third brother, Abbas.

Along the processional route Shia, Sunni and Hindus offer the *dul dul* water, milk, and snacks. Everywhere the horses receive garlands. Lemons are donated to replace those attached to swords. Others simply approach, touch the horse in respect, and hope to receive the blessing of the martyrs.
THE *DULHA* OF SHIVALA:

(33) Miracles occur at the Shivala *Imambara of Dulha Kasim*. During the Muharram, three relic horseshoes, spiritual conduits, are placed on meter-long poles in front of a prayer niche, sprinkled in red, to symbolize the blood of Karbala. Summoned to this world are the spirits of a young Karbala martyr, Kasim, and his devoted horse. The spirits choose a strong young man of the community, a "*dulha*", as their host.

Everybody in Shivala witnesses the miracle. Local tradition often accredits the Hindu community for finding and donating the original horseshoe relic to the *imambara*. Bablu Kumar, a 44-year-old Hindu shopkeeper, sells animal fodder on the Assi Road. He lives in Shivala, near the *imambara*. Bablu has followed the ritual since he was a boy. Together with his brother and friends he runs with the *Dulha Jaluz* over fires of devotion, lit and tended throughout the city.

*Dulha* means "bridegroom" and refers to Kasim, the son of Hasan and nephew of Husayn. The night before the massacre, Kasim was hastily wed to his cousin, the daughter of Husayn. The very next day Kasim fell in battle. Women remember the tragedy of this short-lived marriage through song and prayer while holding a small portion of the red dye, "henna", commonly used to decorate the hands of an Indian bride.

A committee of Sunni, Shia and Hindus organizes the annual selection and procession of the "*dulha". A Shia Majlis pays respect to Kasim and his horse. Mourners, in black-dress, step forward and touch the relics.

Before approaching the horseshoes, candidates for *dulha*, traditionally coming from the Sunni community, bathe in the Ganges and perform their evening prayer. Joining hands, led by a Sunni *maulvi*, they circle round a fire seven times. Only thereafter, in the purified state known as "*pak*", will they enter the *imambara*. 
THE GREAT MERGING JALUZ OF THE 10TH

(35) The 10th of Muharram was the day of massacre. At 4 p.m. the final death blow was delivered and Imam Husayn martyred. Devout Shia neither eat nor drink until after 4 PM.

This is the day of burial. The streets of Banaras are congested as hundreds of taziya, and the martyrs of Karbala, are symbolically carried to rest. Crowds gather, showing respect and hoping to receive a last minute blessing.

Earthen burial sites are all referred to as “Karbala”. Most taziya, will be taken to the Shia compound of Fatman. Paper taziya are deposited in a burial pit. Permanent taziya are stripped of their garlands, covered and returned, without processional cheer, to the imambara.

(36) The Potter’s Taziya of Shivala, and many paper taziya, wander through neighborhood lanes to a water burial in the Ganges. Hindus call this “visarjan”, a final immersion, and merging, into the river of life.

Throughout the night the taziya flow...New and ancient, large and small, spectacularly electrified and simple. Shia, Sunni --- and even several Hindu processions --- merge into an ocean of unity and mourning.

At days end, the doors of the imambara are closed. But the tragedy of Karbala is remembered. Coals of devotion burn on.

1 According to some accounts the daughter of Husayn was Fatima Kubera. According to other accounts the daughter was Zaikina.