

The Great Martyrdom

SYED ASHRAF ALI

THE 10th day of Muharram is a red-letter day in our history. Known as *Ashoura*, it is the anniversary of the inimitable sacrifice which *Hazrat Imam Hussain (RA)*, the youngest grandson of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), made, along with 72 others, to uphold the true teachings of Islam befitting "the Prince of Martyrs."

No wonder, Muslims observe this day as one of mourning and solemn remembrance. Death is inevitable for every mortal. But his was no ordinary demise.

The great *Shahadat* of Kerbala, inspired by his love for Allah showed staggering courage, conviction and endurance, enabling the beloved grandson of the holy Prophet (pbuh) to overcome, so easily, the well-nigh insuperable forces of contemporary evil and untruth.

It is this dying nobly for the cause of truth and justice that confers immortality on man, the immortality which the great son of *Hazrat Ali (RA)* won on the banks of the Furat (Euphrates). The Holy Quran eloquently testifies: "And say not of those who are slain in the Way of Allah: 'They are dead.' Nay, they are living, though ye perceive it not." (2: 154).

The heroic episode of *Hazrat Imam Hussain (RA)* has passed into a legend. The deeds of this "Prince of Martyrs" are sung by minstrels. He reigns supreme in the hearts of millions; he has indeed passed into history, he has become a name.

With the rise of Mu'awiyah (RA), the oligarchic rule of the heathen times displaced the democratic rule of Islam. Paganism, with all its attendant depravity, revived and vice and immorality followed everywhere.

The wealth, which he pitilessly extracted from his subjects, was lavished on his mercenaries, who in turn helped him to repress dissent. Before his death, Mu'awiyah (RA) convened the chief officers making them take an oath of fealty to his son Yezid, whom he designated as his successor to the throne -- a gross and treacherous violation of the terms of peace signed between Mu'awiyah (RA) and Imam Hassan (RA), the eldest son of *Hazrat Ali bin Abu Talib (RA)*.

Imam Hussain (RA) inherited the chivalric nature and virtues of his illustrious father. He combined within himself the right of descent from *Sher-e-Khuda Ali (RA)* with the holy character of the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Great as a devout Muslim, great as an idealist, patriot and a valiant warrior, he was a bold and adventurous man, reckless of conse-

quences and yet intensely practical; one who embodied qualities that giants among men might desire.

Hazrat Hussain (RA) never deigned to acknowledge the title of the tyrant Yezid, whose vices he despised. Naturally, therefore, when the Moslems of Kufa besought his help to release them from the curse and cruelty of Ommeyade rule, he felt it his duty to respond to the Iraqians' appeal for deliverance, and with the assurance that Iraq was ready to hurl the despot from his throne, he set out for Kufa with his family.

He traversed the desert of Arabia undisturbed; accompanied by his brother Abbas (RA), and devoted followers. But upon approaching Iraq, he was alarmed by the hostile face of the country. He saw no signs of the Kufan army which had promised to meet him. Suspecting treachery, he camped his small band at Karbala near the western bank of the Euphrates.

The great Imam's apprehensions of betrayal only proved too true and he was overtaken by an

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Ommeyade army sent by the ferocious Obaidullah bin Zaid, surnamed the Butcher. For days their tents were surrounded.

They dared not come within the reach of Ali's son, but instead cut the victims off from the waters of the Euphrates. Even with three days and nights of intense agony, the indefatigable Imam and his followers endured this unflinchingly.

But with the pain too unbearable, as a last resource, Imam Hussain (RA) besought the cruel monsters not to wage war upon the innocents within the group, but to kill him and be done with it.

But they knew no pity. He pressed his supporters to escape safely, but none deserted their beloved master. The sacrilege of warring against him struck one of the enemies' chiefs with horror and he deserted with thirty followers "to claim the partnership of the inevitable death."

On the morning of the fateful day of the 10th day of Muharram, the auspicious day of *Ashura*,

Hussain's (RA) faithful band of heroes arrayed themselves in battle formation. No hope of victory lay amongst them, yet they knew that they had come to fulfill their destiny -- not win a battle but achieve a timeless moral and spiritual victory.

The Fatimides' indomitable spirit was invincible and every single combat was readily won by them. They slew many more than their own numbers. But the enemy's archers treacherously picked them off from a safe distance. One by one the defenders fell, until at last there remained the noble grandson of the last and greatest Prophet (pbuh).

Severely wounded and dying, he dragged himself to the riverside for a last drink; the inhuman cowards turned him off with arrows. As he returned to his tent, he took his infant child in his arms but they transfixed him with a dart. Alone and weary, he seated himself at the door of his tent. One of the women handed him a cup of water to assuage his burning thirst; as he raised it to his lips he was pierced in the mouth with a dart. He lifted his bloody hands to heaven and uttered a funeral prayer for the living and the dead.

Not merely the Prophet's (pbuh) grandson but also a devout follower of his tenets, the great Imam even in his last hours displayed the highest ideal of spiritual and moral greatness by praying for the very enemies who had killed his infant son and were ready to put him to death. Raising himself for the last desperate charge, the valiant fighter threw himself among the Ommeyade brutes, who fell back on every side.

But the grueling ordeal was too much even for the indomitable Hussain (RA), and with the loss of blood he sank to the ground. The murderous cowards rushed upon the dying hero like vultures; they cut off his head, trampled on the holy body and subjected it to every ignominy they knew.

Hussain (RA) indeed did not die in the ordinary sense of the term. He simply shuffled off the moral coil and set sail towards the Great Unknown through the channel of *Shahadat*.

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Ashoura also comes back every year to rejuvenate the dormant vigour and dampened morale of the misguided and oppressed Moslems all over the world.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

Defining ethical boundaries



THE recent scandal implicating the ex-CIA Director David Petraeus and his biographer Paula Broadwell in an extramarital relationship has created intense media hype. Apart from the fact that the affair contains all the ingredients of a James Bond-style thriller -- sex, espionage, probable national security threat, possible secret document leaks -- it raises serious and long-term questions about the private lives of high profile public figures.

To be honest, I am not interested in the salacious details of the affair. Neither do I want to add to the overhyped media speculation about whether national security has been compromised or not.

For me, the incident raises two critical issues that deserve serious reflection. The first is: "Should public officials be judged by higher moral standards than ordinary people?" To a certain extent this is already the case. There is clear evidence that the American public applies puritanical norms while judging the conduct of public/elected officials.

The rationale seems to be that these officials are the stewards of "public trust" in a way that private sector executives are not! Trust was at the heart of the Clinton scandal. The public was not incensed about the extra-marital affair per se, but that President Clinton had lied and deceived the American people under oath.

Interestingly, it appears that the bar of morality is substantially higher in the United States than in European countries. The public opprobrium attached to the affairs of Herman Cain, Bill Clinton and Eliot Spitzer testifies to the astringent rules of morality in the US.

On the other hand, in France, there was no moral outrage when President Francois Mitterrand's wife and mistress stood next to each other at his funeral. Similarly, in Italy the electorate routinely overlooked Berlusconi's peccadilloes and kept voting him back to the office of the prime minister!

Personally, I would contend that unless a professional rule of conduct has been violated, personal actions, even if they fall outside the generally accepted code of ethics, should not necessarily threaten one's job. However, in the case of General Petraeus, the "private affair" could have a direct bearing on national security. Hence his resignation seemed inevitable.

The second issue rekindled by the Petraeus affair is whether public functionaries deserve the same right to privacy that is available to other citizens. This a complex

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subject since the entire concept of privacy has been evolving over time in the face of improved technology and the demand for greater transparency, especially by certain interest groups.

We live in an age where information technology makes it practically impossible to protect the privacy of people's personal lives. Consequently, private and public lives now share porous boundaries that are difficult to separate.

In the past, scandals occurred in the lives of public officials and political figures but the spill over effect was contained. A case in point is Thomas Jefferson's illicit relationship with a slave with whom he fathered illegitimate children. Although Jefferson's affair was made public during his lifetime, his effectiveness as one of the greatest leaders of American history was not in any way diminished.

Similarly, even a few decades ago the dalliances of Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy were kept under wraps by an "unspoken" commitment by the media to respect the privacy of public officials.

However, since the feminist movements of the 1970s, the public has railed against the double standards of powerful men in the workplace and demanded greater transparency from the media.

Today, there is a prevalent view in the US that the character of a political candidate has a material impact on his electability. Besides, high public officials are expected to serve as role models, espousing strong family values and moral rectitude.

Although it is extremely difficult to draw a line between public life and private morality, I would argue that everyone deserves a private space! If this is not ensured we may be deprived of many great leaders who would opt out of public office.

The key, therefore, is to strike a balance between what is private and what is public! We may also need to compartmentalise the way we assess our leaders by evaluating their professional capabilities rather than the choices they make in their personal lives.

Finally, a personal note. If the CIA Director can fall prey to cyber surveillance, is there anything we ordinary citizens do that remains private? Our personal lives have been invaded by the virus of background checks and verifications to the extent that intimate details of our professional and personal lives are open to public scrutiny.

The line has clearly been crossed. Is it too late to reinstate our basic civil liberties and privacy? I wonder.

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Remembering Mohon Mia

ABUL HASAN CHOWDHURY

THE political, social, economic landscape of India was vastly different at the time when Yousuf Ali Chowdhury, popularly known as Mohon Mia, was born in an ancient zaminder family of East Bengal. The year of his birth, 1905, coincided with East Bengal briefly being accorded the status of a separate province.

Muslims, having lost their ascendancy following the collapse of the Moghul Empire, were confused, bitter and withdrawn. A sense of helplessness had set in the Muslim psyche and for generations they suffered in silence. Those who took bold and seemingly rebellious action, sadly and mistakenly characterised as communal, were in fact challenging an unjust and immoral social order.

Born in the lap of luxury, Mohan Mia could have chosen to live a life of comfort. Instead, he was troubled from a very young age by the environment around him. Mohon Mia lost his father when he was eighteen. His elder brother Lal Mia was at that time a Congress politician. Even as a student of Class Ten he revolted against and successfully changed the humiliating manner in which Muslim students were made to drink water by cupping their hands instead of being provided proper drinking arrangements.

While these practices moved him deeply he knew that to transcend the barriers of poverty proper and pragmatic education was vital. Today, as we speak of agriculture and its fundamental role in lifting the country from poverty, one is struck by the visionary role of Mohon Mia. Baitul Aman agricultural and educational project was his brainchild. Inaugurated in 1945 it was conceived as an engine to generate scope for enhancing agricultural productivity.

Thus, it was no surprise that in his teens Mohon Mia should join the Krishak Proja Party of Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Hoque. Under this legendary figure the young and restive soul of Mohon Mia was plunged into the world of

enlightened politics.

In his quest to bring the light of education for the less fortunate sons and daughters of Faridpur Mohon Mia set up various educational institutions -- Maizuddin High Madrassa, Halima Students' Home, named after his mother, are some of them. These institutions gave students free lodging and meals, thereby relieving the burden on their farmer parents.

When he was chairman of Faridpur District Board, he built numerous roads, bridges and schools. In his fifteen years of leadership of the Board he made strenuous efforts to rid Rajbari of *kalazar* and malaria, which were a curse for the people of the district.

Politics and not the play of power ran through the veins of this charismatic personality. In his quest to build a more humane society it was this impulse more than anything else which attracted him to the tears and tumult of politics. He set a rare example of making way for a respected figure of Faridpur, Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan, for membership of the legislative assembly when he could have gained the seat for himself.

Perhaps this trait earned him the title of "King Maker." Passion for politics for a variety of altruistic reasons finally propelled him towards winning a seat in the legislature in 1937 at a relatively young age of 32. He could have claimed a berth in the cabinet but was reluctant to be encumbered with ministerial obligations. As a confidant of Sher-e-Bangla he zealously worked for the abolition of the zamindary system. Quite an unusual mindset for someone who was himself a landlord.

For Mohon Mia, more than the pomp and ceremony of power, it was important to bring social changes by means of power. Mohon Mia stayed back in the Muslim League when Sher-e-Bangla left the coalition. However, he maintained an intimate and lifelong attachment to the great leader.

One of the stalwarts of Muslim League, he campaigned actively for Jukto Front led by Sher-e-Bangla, Suhrawardy and Maulana Bhasani. He

also worked closely with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Following the Jukto Front victory he had a brief stint as minister. He was steadfast in his stand for the cause of East Pakistan.

Mohon Mia was in the vanguard of the Pakistan movement. After the creation of Pakistan his outlook was a refreshing contrast to that of many of his political compatriots. The minority community in his own district felt they could look up to him as a guardian. Those who opted to leave the country despite his assuring presence were escorted personally by him to India to ensure that no harm came to them.

Mohon Mia, in his zest for life dedicated in the pursuit of principled beliefs, did not stray far from the public opinion of his time. His relentless efforts were all consuming and left little space for paying attention to his family. Loving and caring though he was, much in this regard was meticulously taken care of by Begum Mohon Mia. She epitomised the immortal lines of Nazrul: "Never has the sword of man been victorious without the strength and inspiration of the graceful and humbling support of women."

It was perhaps only to be expected from the descendant of the great Haji Shariatullah who had inspired the people of his time to awaken from their slumber and shake off the chains of tyranny and oppression.

I pray to Allah for the Eternal Bliss of Mohon Mia and hope future generations will be emboldened and enlightened by his shining example.

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