

Symbols of Remembrance

SPECIAL FEATURE

The need to hold on to memories of loved ones that have left us is primal, and universal, as is grief and its expression. Yet, the expressions of grief vary widely, reflecting individual cultures, influences and sometimes even just personal tastes.

The rituals that are observed by a section of the global Muslim population at the beginning of every lunar calendar year, is part of the grieving process, for the tragic loss of the Prophet's (S) grandson Hussain (R), who laid down his life, and was robbed of those of his family during the events of Karbala, where he and his entourage were besieged in the desert near the river Euphrates.

Many Muslims around the world observe the month of Muharram, and the first ten days of Safar, as days of mourning for the tragic loss of the Prophet's descendants, especially in the terribly brutal manner devoid of any mercy, integrity or goodwill.

During this observance in areas, often predominantly Shia households, use of some symbols can be observed. The most ubiquitous are the "shabeeh" or image, the "jhula" or cradle, the "panja," and the different "alm" or flags and banners, and the imagery of Zuljanah the horse. Each of these are supposed to serve as visual reminders of the members of the Prophet's families, but especially those from the house of Fatima (R) and Ali (R). Symbols can include the bifurcated sword that indicates Ali (R) himself, the green and red banner to indicate his two sons, and the banner in the shape of a water-skin to indicate his brother Abbas (R).

THE ZARI OR SHABEEH

One of the primary symbols used to commemorate Hasan and Husayn is called the zari, the symbolic graves side by side, one wrapped in green for Hasan, and the other in red for Husayn. The colours here are also significant, as the green indicates the poison that led to Hasan's death, and the red to the

violence that was inflicted on Husayn, culminating in his murder, and the cruel torture and humiliation faced by his surviving family members. The shabeeh is a smaller scale model of the zari. The placement of the red banners and the green banners is also significant, as from an onlooker's point of view it represents how the Prophet carried his grandsons-- holding Hasan's hand in his right, and carrying Husayn in his left, says Syed Ahmed Ali, son of Syed Taqi Mohammad (the Mutawalli or custodian of the Mohammadi Begum Waqf Imambara in Shaat Rowza area of Old Dhaka.)

ALMS OR BANNERS

Alms or banners carry the names of the martyrs. The most common one is dedicated to Abbas, and is the shape of a large water-



skin, to commemorate his sacrifice and martyrdom while carrying back a skin of water for the suffering children of Husayn's camp. Often, his alm will have the image of a hand, to remind mourners of how he valiantly kept trying to carry the water back to the camp for his beloved nieces and nephews, despite having his arms cut off one after one, until he was martyred.

THE OPEN PALM

The symbol for Pak Panjatan, or the Holy Five, include the Prophet, Ali, Fatima (R), Hasan and Husayn. The Holy Five are also referred to as People of the House, or Ahl-e Bayt, but this term is also used to indicate

all members of the Prophet's household.

The status of the holy five is asserted by incidences that happened during the Prophet's own lifetime, supported by the Quran and Hadith. One such incidence is that of the Mubahila, when the Prophet was called upon to have a demonstration against some Christian adversaries, against the massive numbers faced with, he took with him the four mentioned. "But whoever disputes with you in this matter after what has come to you of knowledge, then say: Come let us call our sons and your sons and our women and your women and our near people and your near people, then let us be earnest in prayer, and pray for the curse of Allah on the liars," Quran 3:61, Ayat-e Mubahila.

Hasan and Husayn were integral to the



Holy Five, and so has the Pak Panjatan open palm symbol become integral to the observance of Muharram for many.

THE EMPTY CRADLE

Another heart-wrenching symbol of the atrocities wrecked upon the family of Husayn at Karbala is the empty cradle of his six-month old son Ali Asghar, who was shot dead by the Yazidi camp's soldiers when Husayn took him to plead for access to some water and mercy on the women and children of his caravan.

The empty cradle is reminiscent of the senseless and unconscionable torture perpetrated on the innocents at Karbala, Ali

Asghar in his infancy becoming the personified essence of it.

ZULJANAH THE HORSE

The horse, called Zuljanah, was the one that Husayn was riding during the events at Karbala. He is considered a chosen animal, as part of God's miracles, and first belonged to and reared by the Prophet himself. Legend has it that even as a baby, Husayn had shown special fascination with Zuljanah, and the horse was aware of his intentions. On the fateful day, Zuljanah came back to Husayn's camp with an empty saddle, and the absence of Husayn as its rider confirmed the women and children's apprehension of his martyrdom. It is said that after Husayn was martyred, Zuljanah walked to the River Euphrates and was never seen again.

In its entirety, the battle of Karbala between the two groups, so very disparate in their numerical strengths, is a quintessential symbol of the fight between good and evil, and the superiority and undying nature of good as it prevails over evil, even in death. Husayn and his martyred companions, and the family members that survived the battle and the assault afterwards, all stood fearless in the face of Yazid's tyranny, while always upholding their moral principles. His companions consciously chose to stay behind and offered themselves up as protection as long as even one of them was alive, despite being offered by Husayn the chance to run away in the darkness of the night. This event is a lesson for Muslims of all ages to make their stand with whatever is right, despite the trials that are sure to follow. It also teaches us to speak up, if nothing more, against tyrannical rulers and their cronies.

By Sania Aiman

Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed/LS Archive

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