Muharram

Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar. It is one of the four sacred months of the year. Since the Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar, Muharram moves from year to year when compared with the Gregorian calendar.

Ashura

Ashura, which literally means the "Tenth" in Arabic, refers to the tenth day of Muharram. It is well-known because of historical significance and mourning for the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of Muhammad (saww) , along with his family members, relatives and companions.

The Shia as well as some Sunni communities begin mourning from the first night of Muharram and continue for ten nights, climaxing on the 10th of Muharram, known as the Day of Ashura. The last few days up until and including the Day of Ashura are the most important because these were the days in which Hussein and his family and followers (consisting of 72 people, including women, children and elderly people) were killed by the army of Yazid at the Battle of Karbala on his orders. Surviving members of Hussein's family and those of his followers were taken captive, marched to Damascus, and imprisoned there.

Muharram is also observed by Dawoodi Bohras in the same way as Shias.

In some Shi'a regions of Muslim countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Pakistan, the Commemoration of Husayn ibn Ali has become a national holiday and most ethnic and religious communities participate in it. Even in predominantly Hindu majority but

secular country like India, Ashura (10th day in the month of Muharram) is a public holiday.

Significance of Ashura

This day is of particular significance to Muslims especially the Shi'a Muslims.

On Ashura, as they do forty days later on Arba'een, they visit the Mashhad al-Husayn, the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala, Iraq. On this day they are in remembrance, and mourning attire is worn. It is a time for sorrow and respect of the person's passing, and it is also a time for self-reflection, when one commits oneself to the mourning of the Husayn completely. Weddings and parties are also not planned on this date. They also express mourning by crying and listening to recollections about the tragedy and sermons on how Husayn and his family were martyred. This is intended to connect them with Husayn's suffering and martyrdom, and the sacrifices he made to keep Islam alive. Husayn's martyrdom is widely interpreted as a symbol of the struggle against injustice, tyranny, and oppression. In fact the Battle of Karbala was fought to keep the Muslim religion untainted of any corruptions and they believed the path that Yazid was directing Islam was definitely for his own personal greed.

Ahl al-Bayt strongly insisted that the day of Ashura should not be taken as a day of joy and festivity.

Some of the events associated with Ashura are held in special congregation halls known as "Imambargah" and Hussainia.

Popular customs

Commemoration of Ashura is not a festival, but rather a sad event. Mourners, congregate at a Mosque for sorrowful, poetic recitations such as marsiya, noha, latmiya and soaz performed in memory of the martyrdom of Husayn, lamenting and grieving to the tune of beating drums and chants of "Ya Hussain." Also Ulamas give sermons with themes of Husayn's personality and position in Islam, and the history of his uprising. The Sheikh of the mosque retells the Battle of Karbala to allow the listeners to relive the pain and sorrow endured by Husayn and his family. In Arab countries like Iraq and Lebanon they read Maqtal al-Husayn. In some places, such as Iran, Iraq and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, Ta'zieh, passion plays, are also performed reenacting the Battle of Karbala and the suffering and martyrdom of Husayn at the hands of Yazid.

For the duration of the remembrance, it is customary for mosques and some people to provide free meals (NAZRI) on certain nights of the month to all people.

Participants congregate in public processions for ceremonial chest beating (matham/latmiya) as a display of their devotion to Husayn, in remembrance of his suffering and to preach that oppression will not last in the face of truth and justice. Others pay tribute to the time period by holding a Majilis, Surahs from the Quran and Maqtal Al-Husayn are read.

Today in Indonesia, the event is known as Tabuik (Minangkabau language) or Tabut (Indonesian). Tabuik is the local manifestation of the Shi'a Muslim Mourning of Muharram among the Minangkabau people in the coastal regions of West Sumatra, particularly in the city of Pariaman. The festival includes reenactments of the Battle of Karbala, and the playing of tassa and dhol drums.

Socio-political aspects

Commemoration of Ashura played an important role during the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the Lebanese Civil War, the Lebanese resistance against the Israeli military presence and in the 1990s Uprising in Bahrain. Sometimes the `Ashura' celebrations associate the memory of Al-Husayn's martyrdom with the conditions of Islam and Muslims in reference to Husayn's famous quote on the day of Ashura: "Every day is Ashura, every land is Karbala".

From the period of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) onward, mourning gatherings increasingly assumed a political aspect. Following an old established tradition, preachers compared the oppressors of the time with Imam Hosayn's enemies, the umayyads.

The political function of commemoration was very marked in the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79, as well as during the revolution itself.

On the other hand some governments have banned this commemoration. In 1930s Reza Shah forbade it in Iran. The regime of Saddam Hussein saw this as a potential threat and banned Ashura commemorations for many years.