

THE MUHARRAM IN WESTERN INDIA.

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INDIA is the land of festivals. There is no day which is not sacred to some god or saint; and many of these celebrations overlap or coalesce. Amid this welter of festivity, half a dozen great festivals stand out by themselves.

The Muharram* is the high festival of the Muslims in India. It falls on the first ten days of the first month of the Muslim year, called Muharram, or "sacred"; and by this name it is usually known. The historical basis of the festival is found in the tragic death of Ali, who married the daughter of Muhammad, and of his two sons; but of that we shall speak later.

For many days before the festival begins, the village carpenter is busy erecting mimic tombs of bamboo, to be covered finally with tinsel and colored paper. These tazias, as they are called in the north, or tabuts, in Western India, are intended as effigies of the tomb of the martyrs; and a fine turban and costly armor are laid at the back to represent the state and consequence of Husayn, Ali's son, slain on the bloody plain of Karbala. In the wealthy Muhammadan states of the north, these tazias are magnificent and costly creations; some of which are held over from year to year, and exhibited to the wondering eyes of the tourist. Large or small, they are

* The following table shows some common variants in the spelling of Muhammadan names. The spelling preferred by the author is followed in this article.

PREFERRED FORM	OLDER FORM
Muharram	Mohurrum
Muslim	Moslem
Muhammad	Mohammad, etc.
Hasan	Hassan
Husayn	Hosein
Qasim	Cassim
Qurān	Koran
Karbala	Kerbela
Sunnīs	Sunnites
Shiāhs	Shiites
Shiva (better, Shiwa)	Siva, Civa
Shaivites	Sivites, Civites
Himalyas	Himalayas

fairly faithful copies of the domed Muslim tombs which lend picturesqueness to every scene. In the Maratha country, as Western India is more properly called, originality is sought after. Although Islam acknowledges no caste, the guilds of the various trades band together to erect tabuts. Thus, in Satara where I was living, the beef-butchers built one four stories high; the vegetable venders had one on which, appropriately, they induced rice or some other quick-growing grain to sprout, so that it was covered with a velvety coat of living green; one guild of mutton-butchers displayed the figure of a horseman attacked by a tiger; while a fourth had an athlete standing between two women. In the north there is much bitter feeling between the Muhammadans and the Hindus; but in Western India, owing to the Muslims being in a weak minority, a general friendliness prevails, so that each tabut is supported not only by the men of its own guild and quarter but by subscriptions from Hindus as well.

The Ashura Khana, or Ten-Day House, is erected. Here every evening during the festival, crowds of people assemble for the majlises, or mourning meetings, a band of singers chant the *Marsiya*, a poem in honor of Husayn; and the *Waqia Khan* narrates in graphic style the story of the tragic and pathetic death of the hero, while the audience sway their bodies and beat their breasts, wailing, "Ali! Ali! Husayn! Husayn!"

While the festival is in progress, bands of boys, and sometimes girls, wander about the streets, blowing raucous blasts on hollow bamboos; others, preceded by drummers, and arrayed fantastically, demand subscriptions from shop-keepers and householders. Near the tabut, an Arab mummer makes nerve-racking cracks with a split bamboo. Some see in this man a scapegoat or guardian, who frightens homeless spirits from the mimic tombs in which they would like to dwell. *Sabils*, or little refreshment stands, are set up in many places to supply sherbet to thirsty devotees.

On the tenth day comes the *Tazion ka Mela*, or real "feast of mourning." On this day the great procession assembles. All the tabuts from the surrounding villages press into the nearest town, and, packed in the mouths of the narrow streets giving on the main route of march, await their turn to fall into line. The scene is one of the greatest confusion. Throngs of gaily dressed natives of every creed and caste mass themselves on the narrow sidewalks, and, overflowing walls and roofs, fill windows and doorways. In the country towns in Western India, it is usually a good-natured crowd, out for a holiday, eating fruit and sweets, chaffing each other, and

having a good time generally. Above the noise a greater din arises, strengthened by kettle-drums and all manner of unmusical instruments, and the cry goes round that the procession is coming! At the head of this motley rout is led the white *duldul* horse, two in Satara, typical of the steeds of the martyrs. Other emblems carried on poles crowd close on these. On *ucz sahibs*, imitation spears, since the government has prohibited real ones, limes are borne, typical of the carrying of Husayn's head at Karbala, and of much else in India. Horse-shoes, recalling Husayn's swift steed, serve also as a trap for wandering spirits. The *panja*, or hand, is popularly supposed to represent the five members of the Prophet's family, Muhammad, Fatima, Ali and his two sons; probably its original signification was merely that of a tomb, for it is well known that the hand takes the place of the skull and cross-bones on Semitic tombstones. Bunches of black hair figure among the standards and may typify Husayn's horse (which was white); but more probably is the hair which takes the place of a victim in a funeral sacrifice. Western Indian Muhammadanism is thoroughly saturated with Hinduism as well as with its own original heathenism. The most remarkable adjunct of the Muharram is seen in the tiger-men. They are in evidence throughout the ten days and swarm in the final procession. In the recent celebration in Mysore, a touch of realism was given by carrying one about in a cage. But of these more anon.

With Oriental dilatoriness, it is generally late in the afternoon when the thronging ill-regulated procession gets fairly under way. With many halts and turns and twists, it moves slowly through the crowded streets. Night falls, and a myriad swinging lights spring into being. Torches flaming at both ends are whirled, making double circles of fire. The music, the shouting, the wailing, the hysteria, increase; the procession becomes a mad rabble; and in the small hours of the deepening night, the devotees, fevered, exhausted, smitten by the chill wind, creep back to their homes for a brief troubled sleep or a continuation of the orgy.

Next day, the procession forms anew, generally in the morning. The enthusiasm of the night evaporates under the sunshine. The tabuts are taken to the seaside, or to the bank of a tank or river. Here the ornaments and everything of value are stripped off; and the bamboo skeleton, often broken and bedraggled, is *takked*, that is, thrown with ceremony into the water, in a frank following of Hindu custom. In Bombay City, the two rival factions, Sunnis as well as Shiahhs, observe the Muharram with processions of tabuts, immersion, and the rest. When a friendly spirit prevails, as was the case

two years ago, the processions march at different hours, and everything passes off quietly. But when the two processions collide, as they did last year, there is trouble, often resulting in loss of life. The Shiahs are generally the aggressors, keeping a pious silence as they pass their own mosques, but giving vent to much noisy music as they pass those of their rivals. Just before the recent Muharram, the leaders of both factions were brought together at a great dinner, and peace and friendship were declared; but the only outcome was a sullen foregoing of the processions and final rites.

Back of this feast of mourning, or the Muharram, to use its popular name, is a chapter of history. When Muhammad undertook his great work of reforming society and promulgating a new religion, he found the Arab tribes engaged in perpetual fights and bitter feuds. So fierce and deadly was this intertribal warfare, that Islam might have failed at the beginning for lack of a man to accept it, had not some early Arab Solon induced his fellows to set aside four months in the year, the first seventh, eleventh and twelfth, as months of peace, to allow of the practice of religion. We observe a similar *tabu* on fighting during the Olympic Games in ancient Greece; and in the curious institution of the *Trêve de Dieu* in France in the Middle Ages, which is paralleled to-day in the Khaiber Pass. The Prophet found this arrangement so beneficial that he incorporated it into his religion; and the Muslim Muharram, literally the "sacred" first month of the year, began as a month of peace, wherein pilgrims might safely perform their return journey from Mecca.

Had Muhammad been equally careful to appoint his successor, the Muharram might still have remained a time of truce. On his death, many thought that Ali, his cousin and son-in-law and first disciple, should succeed him; but to others the more gifted Omar seemed the right person. This caused a faction, which came to a head when Ali, after becoming the fourth Caliph, was murdered in 661. His son Hasan succeeded him; but being a weak youth, more given to piety and uxoriousness than to war and government, he abdicated the office within a year and retired into private life. His end is uncertain; some claim that he was killed by a tiger; others, that after divorcing seventy wives (some say only fifty) the next one poisoned him. Husayn, meanwhile, grew up noble, brave and beautiful, the hero of many a song and tale, skilled in all manly accomplishments, and beloved of all. Like many a similar leader of a lost cause, bad advice and treachery were his undoing, and his noble and pathetic death at Karbala gave him the crown of martyr-

dom and the aureole of a saintly champion. With his death ended the struggle of the Fatimid family for the Khalifat. But the Muslim world was hopelessly split into the factions of the Sunnis and Shiahs.

The Sunnis are the orthodox party, following the Sunnat, or "tradition," and rejecting the claims of Ali and his descendants. They observe Muharram as a month of fasting, as originally instituted; but keep the tenth day as a festival, saying that on that day God created Adam. The Muslims of Hyderabad, the largest native state in India, observe, instead of the tenth, the seventh, Langar Day, telling a local legend about a boy prince rescued from an elephant. But with that we have nothing to do.

The Shiahs, of whom are most of the Muslims of Persia and India, hold that Ali was the Vicar of God, little, if any, inferior to Muhammad, and that Omar, in making up the canon of the Quran, left out many important passages proving this. They revere Ali, his two sons, and their seven successors as the ten Imams; and hold in high regard their descendants, of whom many are still living. Their principal tenet is hatred of the Sunnis; and their greatest holiday the first ten days of Muharram as a feast of mourning, which we have just described.

Back of the history, which is genuine enough, lies the mythological matrix. Here we have one of the many instances in which a historical person serves as a nucleus for the crystallization of brilliant and beloved myths. Muhammad made the sacred year rigidly lunar, rejecting the intercalation of an extra month once every two or three years, as impious. As a result, the Muharram, during a period of thirty-three years, swings through every season. Originally, Muharram was really the beginning of the solar as well as of the lunar year; and our Indian "festival of grief" links up with the tabued Tammuz festival, prototype of the Adonis festival of Asiatic Greece and the Easter of pagan Europe. Wherever winter follows summer, and is followed in turn by spring, there we find the weird myths of death and resurrection, whether of Korè or of Ishtar, of Baldur the Beautiful or of Shiva the Destroyer.

The Muharram festival, like the Baldur story, lacks the essential feature of the resurrection, probably because the mythical hero has been replaced by an historical one; perhaps, too, because Islam, in its break with Christianity, did not care to have any resurrection *motif* made prominent. But the resurrection idea comes forward in an unexpected manner, namely, in the presence of the tiger-men. Their presence is accounted for in many ways. On one of the floats

at the festival in Satara, a tiger attacks a horseman, and the story is told that thus Hasan came to his death; but this story has not a wide credence. Another explanation is that the tiger is a great spirit house for attracting and quieting spirits disturbed by a funeral procession. Neither seems sufficient to account for the number and prominence of the tiger-men.

Tiger-men are found in Persia; but there they are generally boys disporting themselves harmlessly. In India, especially Western India, they are for the most part Hindus, usually of low caste. Dressed only in a scanty loin-cloth, their bodies striped black and yellow, a long tiger-tail switching behind, and a sharp antelope horn in each hand, these men, drunk with *bhang*, during the whole of the Muharram festival roam the country in imitation of tigers, dancing, raging, even killing. It is a remarkable fact that the victims are generally persons against whom the tiger-man, before assuming the character, had some grudge. It is impossible to convict such a man of murder; for the people believe that the tiger-men are inspired by God (Parameshwar = *θεός*), and therefore that the god claimed a sacrifice and not that the man committed a murder.

The tiger is the most mystical animal in India. This reverence for him, increased by the belief that no man or beast once mauled by a tiger ever recovers, probably accounts for the great number of people who annually fall victims to his claws. In some provinces these victims are not allowed to be buried or burned lest evil, especially drought, befall the land.

The tiger is closely connected with Shiva; and in the Linga worship, the tiger skin, according to the *Linga Purana*, plays an important part. Most of the Hindus of Western India are Shaivites, especially of the subdivision called Lingaits; and the fact that a respectable Hindu woman will not look at a tiger-man goes to confirm the conjecture that the tiger-man is an incarnation of Shiva.

Shiva's position as third of the Hindu Trinity has nearly obliterated his earlier character. He was not a Vedic deity; and much ingenuity has been required to identify him with Rudra. That he was a frequenter of graveyards, a companion of ghosts, a drunkard, a reveler, a mad man and a wanderer, insulted and cursed by gods and demigods, shows that he was a foreigner; and many of these attributes point to some form of Dionysus brought in from the north, over the Himalyas. The Greek Dionysus, under the name of Iacchos, was of that dread circle who had chthonian attributes, a god of decaying and returning vegetation. It would be interesting to follow out the parallel between Shiva and this divinity, both of

Semitic origin, both gods of the dead, outcasts and despised, yet rising to the highest rank in their respective pantheons. It is significant also that as the panther was sacred to Bacchus, so the tiger belongs to Shiva. In the Hindu philosophy, with its overwhelming belief in rebirth and continued existence after death, this aspect of Shiva as a god of resurrection, loses its force, or, rather, is transformed into that of the destroyer and re-creator, which practically amounts to the same thing. It may seem far-fetched to see in the tiger-men in the Muharram festival the missing resurrection *motif*; but such things are not uncommon in religious observances.

A few days before Husayn's murder, to go back to the historic narrative, he gave his favorite daughter in marriage to Qasim, son of Hasan. This event is commemorated on the seventh day of the Muharram, called the Mahdi, when the Alam i Qasim, or standard, is carried in procession, and fine garments are borne on the backs of horses and camels, as at a wedding. When this standard is brought back to the Ashura Khana, as Qasim's representative, it is laid down, covered over, and treated as a corpse.

In Bombay a more realistic "bridegroom" is found. The Dula, as he is called, sits, in fulfilment of a vow, with his head green capped, over an urn of frankincense. At intervals he is raised, a pole bearing the funeral *panja*, or hand, is bound to his chest, and a bunch of peacock feathers is given him. Thus encumbered, and intoxicated with the fumes of the incense, he is led through the streets; and people supposed to be afflicted with evil spirits or witchcraft appeal to him for relief.

Here we have a marriage interjected into the very midst of funeral wailing; nor does it require much ingenuity to see in this, even more than in the tiger-men of Shiva, a hint of the resurrection. To the Hindu mind, the father lives in the son; Husayn, about to die, gives his daughter in marriage to his dead brother's son, and thus provides for the continuity of the race. In mythology, moreover, marriage is closely connected with death, that death which is but the ante-chamber of a new life. This idea is especially emphasized in Greece, where Korè, the bride of Hades, is typical of the soul; and this mystic marriage is set forth in a whole series of fine amphorae.

In conclusion, we may see in the wild orgy of grief of the Muharram, not merely a sectarian celebration of the glorious death of a martyr, but a new mingling of the palm and the willow, a reiteration of the oldest beliefs and fears and hopes of the race, the sorrow for the untimely end of the noble and the beautiful; the hope, dim, timid, yet real and fervent, of a life to come.