

BATTLE OF KERBALA

By: Mumtaz Ali Tajddin S. Ali

mumtaztajddin@yahoo.com

"A fierce battle was waged against Imam Hussain in the plain of Karbala. He fought alone with thousand of persons at that time. Despite suffering oppression and severe trouble, he declared, "I am the Imam." During the moment of such calamities, he did not disappear, but with mere a stick (authority of the Imamate), he penetrated the ranks of the enemies ahead in the battle. He did not hide his Imamate at that time. If the dress (*jomo*) of the Imam is not present, then all will become infidels. The authority of Imam Hussain is with me at present and I myself am Imam Hussain. You know that I am going hither and thither today with one authority in hand, because I myself am an Imam. I don't have any fear. The Imam is apparent, and in case the affliction befalls upon him, nevertheless, he does not disappear. It is not so necessary to go into depth (to unearth) the analogies of the evidence in this context." Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah (Nagalpur, Kutchh, 28/11/1903)

Abu Abdullah Hussain bin Ali was born on the 3rd Shaban, 4/January, 626 in Medina. When the news of his birth reached to the Prophet, he came to his daughter's house, and took the child in his arms affectionately, and named him Hussain. He spent his early life in the lap of the Prophet, who loved him too much and said, "I owe my being to Hussain, and Hussain owes his being to me." (**Ibn Majah**, 1:33). It is related that once, while addressing in the mosque, the Prophet was interrupted all of a sudden by the cry of a boy, whose voice resembled that of Hussain. He asked to a person to enquire whether Hussain was weeping. The Prophet was soon reported that the weeping boy was a student, whose teacher had punished him due to negligence to his lesson. The Prophet sent for the teacher and said, "Please do not punish this boy so much that causes him to weep, as his voice resembles that of my child Hussain."

Imam Hussain was 6 years old during the demise of the Prophet and his mother. He was married to Shahr Banu, the daughter of Yazdigard, the last Sassanid king of Iran. During his living in Medina, since the death of his father, Imam Hussain was mostly engaged in the intellectual pursuits with his followers.

After the abdication of Hazrat Hasan, Muawiya became an absolute ruler of the Islamic state, which he diplomatically acquired on the ground of "Revenge of Uthman's blood." It must be pointed out that when he became absolute ruler, neither had he investigated the assassin of Uthman, nor he did care for this issue. It was mere a pretext to establish the Umayyad rule in Syria.

Perhaps the most important event in the history of the development of the Shi'ite passion was Muawiya's nomination of his son Yazid to succeed him. He could not act in this direction as long as Hazrat Hasan lived, and it is significant that immediately after the news of his death, Muawiya began actively on the project, which was not so easy. He had to move with great caution and used all devices: diplomacy, gifts, bribes, and finally threat and oppression.

Muawiya died in 60/680 and with his death, his son Yazid issued orders to his governor of Medina, Walid bin Utba, to exact homage from Imam Hussain and Abdullah bin Zubayr. Walid bin Utba summoned them in his palace. Abdullah bin Zubayr did not go and fled to Mecca. Imam Hussain went to the palace alone. Walid read to him Yazid's letter and asked for the recognition of the new caliph. Imam Hussain replied uncommittedly that the oath, in order to be valid, must be made in public and that the governor should arrange a public gathering in the mosque where he would also be present. With this reply, the Imam rose to leave the palace. Walid bin Utba extended lenient attitude towards the Imam, therefore, he was shortly dismissed from his post.

Abdullah bin Zubayr, who reached Mecca prior to Imam Hussain and gathered people around him against Yazid. He is reported to have been harbouring secret ambitions for the caliphate himself. But as soon as Imam arrived in the city, the influence for Abdullah bin Zubayr's candidature melted away. The people abandoned Abdullah bin Zubayr and gathered around Imam Hussain. In Kufa, as soon as the people received a word of Muawiya's death, they held a series of meetings, expressing their loyalty for Imam Hussain. They sent out numerous letters, urging the Imam to come in Kufa to guide them and release from the tyranny and oppression of the Umayyad. The first letter Imam Hussain received on 10th Ramzan, 60/June 15, 680; duly signed by Suleman bin Surad al-Khuzai, Al-Musayyab bin Najaba, Rifa bin Shaddad, Habib bin al-Muzahir, and Muslim bin Awsaja on behalf of the Kufans.

Imam Hussain had no political ambition. There is no evidence that he tried for it while at Mecca, to enlist active supporters from among the people who gathered around him, or to propagate his cause among the mass of people who congregated in Mecca for the pilgrimage. He never attempted to depute his emissaries to stir up any rebellion in provinces such as Yamen and Iran, which were sympathetic to the house of Hazrat Ali. Imam Hussain never mustered even a small force against the Umayyad, which was an easy for him. And above all, had he acted promptly on the invitation of Kufans, while the governorship of the city was in the hands of the weak Noman bin Bashir, he might have had a fair chance of success. His speedy arrival would not only have forestalled any effective action on the part of the Umayyad government, but would also have stirred real enthusiasm among the Kufans.

In spite of hundreds of letters sent by the Kufans, Imam Hussain did not take a hasty decision, but sent his cousin, Muslim bin Aqil, to Kufa with instructions to ascertain the truth of these representations and report back of his survey. As soon as Muslim bin Aqil arrived in Kufa, there was held in the house of Suleman bin Surad a meeting, which for the sake of secrecy, was attended only by the leaders of Kufa. Very soon, Muslim bin Aqil quickly gathered thousand of pledges of support, and the number of people who

registered their names and swore allegiance to Muslim bin Aqil in the name of Imam Hussain is variously given as 12,000 and 18,000. Soon the movement became so widespread that Muslim bin Aqil was able to preside over the public meetings from the pulpit in the cathedral mosque of Kufa. Confident of Kufan support, Muslim bin Aqil consequently wrote to Imam Hussain to come to Kufa and assume spiritual leadership of the people. His letter was sent to Imam Hussain by Abis bin Habib ash-Shakiri. Having been assured of the extent of Kufan enthusiasm, Imam Hussain decided to go to Kufa.

Receiving word of Muslim bin Aqil's activities in Kufa, Yazid no longer trusting the mild-tempered, Noman bin Bashir, and appointed Ibn Ziyad to take charge of Kufa. Ibn Ziyad delivered a terrifying speech in Kufa, declaring death and unprecedented punishment for the sympathizers of Imam Hussain, while making tempting promises for those who would prove their loyalty to Yazid. The Kufans were stricken by awe and fear, completely lost hearts, and ultimately abandoned Muslim bin Aqil. He was captured and beheaded together with Hani bin Urwa, in whose house he had stayed. This attitude of the Kufans once again demonstrated the weakness of their disloyalty in their veins.

While Imam Hussain on the other side was making preparations for departure from Mecca when the thing took a reverse turn for him in Kufa. He left Mecca on 8th Zilhaja, 60/September 10, 680, the same day Muslim bin Aqil had been killed. While he was heading towards Iraq, Ibn Ziyad made Kufa a scene of terror and horror, and imposed strict martial law. He made a declaration that anyone suspected of supporting Imam Hussain, would be hanged without trial, his house would be set on fire and his property would be confiscated. Ibn Ziyad also blockaded all the roads leading from Mecca to Kufa and gave strict orders forbidding anyone from entering or leaving the territory of Kufa. The Imam knew all these measures, but continued his journey undeterred.

Imam Hussain reached Taneem, a few miles from Mecca. He thence started and made a junction at a place called Sifah, where according to Tabari (2:242) he met poet Farazdaq and inquired about the conditions in Kufa. Farazdaq replied, "Their hearts are with you, but their swords are with your enemies." Imam Hussain resumed his journey and reached Salabia, then Waqesia. Khuzaimia was the fifth resting place, and thence he advanced and alighted at Zubala. When he reached Ath-Thalibiya, he received word from some travellers of the executions of Muslim bin Aqil and Hani bin Urwa. After leaving it, Imam Hussain reached Batn Aqiq, a place few stages from Kufa; and upon learning of the strong Umayyad force stationed at Qadisiya, he changed his route to enter Kufa from another direction. Hussain bin Numayr, the Umayyad commander at Qadisiya, was informed of Imam's change of route, and sent a detachment of one thousand troops under the command of Hur bin Yazid at-Tamimi to intercept him. When they appeared on the horizon, Imam ordered his people to pitch their tents at a place called Dhu Husm. The army of Hur soon reached Imam Hussain. The day was very hot and Hur's army had run out of water. Imam ordered his men to give water to the Umayyad troops and their horses. Hur had a regard for the Imam, and even when four of the leading Kufans, who had managed to escape from the city and joined Imam, Hur did not dare to use force. Imam explained to his adversaries the reason, which had

caused him to set out. According to Tabari (2: 298), Imam said: "O people of Kufa! you sent to me your delegations and wrote me letters saying that you had no Imam and that I should come to unite you and lead you in the way of God.....But if you have changed your minds, have become ignorant of our rights, and have forgotten your delegations and repeated appeals to me to come for the sake of your religion, I shall turn back."

Then Imam Hussain showed Hur two sacks full of letters of the Kufans, but Hur said that he knew nothing, and that he had come with the orders of Ibn Ziyad to arrest him and his party. Imam refused to submit, but still Hur did not use force. It was however agreed that Imam Hussain should keep on travelling along the Euphrates in the opposite direction from Kufa until fresh orders arrived from the governor and that Hur would follow closely.

When they reached the district of Ninawa, a horseman arrived from Kufa, and gave a letter to Hur from Ibn Ziyad, ordering him not to allow Imam to make halt except in a desert place without fortifications of water. Imam, therefore, advanced a bit turning to the left when Hur's contingent stopped him from moving further and asked him to alight, adding that the Euphrates was not far from there. Imam said, "This is the stage of distress (*karb*) and trial (*bala*)" and got down from his horse (**Tabari**, 2:232), thus this place became known as *Karbala*, about 25 miles north-west of Kufa; where Imam pitched his tents when it was 2nd Muharram, 61/October 2, 680.

On the 3rd Muharram, the situation deteriorated as Umar bin Sa'd arrived with the fresh Umayyad force of 4,000 men and assumed overall command on the field. Ibn Sa'd learned that the Imam now intended to return to Medina, but Ibn Ziyad sent orders that all the "rebels" should render homage to Yazid. On 7th Muharram, an embargo was placed on the water supply to the Imam's camp, and for that Ibn Sa'd stationed a force of 500 cavalry on the road to the river. Imam and his party suffered terribly from thirst. A daring sortie led by Abbas, the brother of Imam, however, managed to reach the river, but succeeding in filling only a few water skins.

Ibn Sa'd was still trying to persuade Ibn Ziyad to find some peaceful solutions to avoid shedding the blood of the grandson of the Prophet, but all in vain. Ibn Ziyad sent his final orders to Ibn Sa'd through Shimar bin Dhul Jawshan, either to attack or hand over the field command to Shimar. Soon after receiving these orders on the evening of 9th Muharram, Ibn Sa'd advanced with his forces towards the Imam's camp, who sent Abbas for a respite of one night, which was granted. Imam Hussain assembled his relatives and followers and induced them to abandon the field to his fate. The relatives and followers of the Imam refused to leave or survive after him, and demonstrated an unshakable devotion to the Imam, and said, "By God, we will never leave you alone until all of us are killed and our bodies are torn to pieces. By this we will have fulfilled our duties to you" (**Tabari**, 2:322). Thus, the whole night was spent in prayer, recitation of Koran and worship. The borrowed night ended, and the fateful morning of 10th Muharram brought with it the summons of the tragic result of the family of Ali bin Abu Talib and its handful supporters. Imam drew up in front of the tents his small band of 72 men: 32 horsemen and 40 foot soldiers of varying ages ranging from 70 years old Muslim bin Awsaja to the 14 years old Kassim bin Hasan bin Ali. Zuhayr bin Qayn was

given command of the right wing, Habib bin Mazahir al-Asadi of the left, and Abbas bin Ali was entrusted with the standard of the Hashimite house.

Shortly before the fateful battle began, Hur bin Yazid, the Umayyad commander, the first who confronted Imam and forced him to halt at Karbala, was now confronted and agitated by his own conscience and feelings. He suddenly spurred his horse and threw himself at Imam's feet.

Hence, a skirmish ensued, but the men of Imam kept within their camp, where they could only be reached by the archers. From time to time there were single combats in defiance. It began in the morning and ended shortly after noon as both parties desisted from the fight at the hour of noontide prayer. It was in the afternoon that the battle became fiercer, and Imam Hussain's handful supporters one after the other fell fighting in front of him. The first to be killed was Ali Akbar, the son of the Imam, followed in quick succession by the son of Muslim bin Aqil, the sons of Aqil, three brothers of Abbas bin Ali, then Kassim, the son of Hasan; and eventually there remained only two: Imam Hussain and his half-brother Abbas bin Ali. With broken hearts and distressed, both brothers went together and fell upon the enemy. The enraged Abbas penetrated deep into the ranks of his foes, became separated from Imam Hussain, and was killed some distance away.

Alone and weary, Imam Hussain returned to his tents to console the terrified women and children and bid them farewell for the last time, and to consign spiritual authority of Imamate to his son, Zayn al-Abidin. Before getting into the tent, he saw that some archers were dashing towards him. The Imam suddenly found at his utter surprise that his one follower, Abdullah bin Umar Kalbi was yet survived. He called him and said, "Abdullah, I am going into the tent, but I can't because of these archers. You stop them." Abdullah said, "Mawla! You go inside, I will check them." Imam Hussain hence entered the tent and transferred the Imamate to his son. Soon afterwards, he came out and saw the dead bodies of the archers, but found no trace of Abdullah bin Umar Kalbi. Imam exclaimed and found him in near distance, who was taking last breath. Imam approached and sat on the ground and put his head on his lap and said, "Abdullah, I pray for your invaluable service. Do you remember that your grandfather once threw a stone on my grandfather (Holy Prophet) and broke his tooth. He is suffering from hell-fire. Due to your today's outstanding service, God transferred your grandfather from hell to paradise."

Exhausted and wounded, Imam Hussain then sat in front of the tent, sheltering the women and children. Yet nobody dare to attack him, until Shimar ended the delay. He caused Imam to separate from the tent, and several soldiers fell upon him and killed him. Sinan bin Anas bin Amr raised his sword to make the final blow on Imam Hussain, and cut off his head.

Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah said, "Shimar used to say that he was a slave of God and also worshipped God, even then he martyred Imam Hussain. Not only this, he also was hurry to kill Imam Hussain. Imam Hussain said, "Why you are hurry?" Shimar replied, "It is now the time for the Namaz, so that I may kill you quickly and join the Namaz to

offer it... This is not obligatory to kill the Imam, then offer the Namaz. How it is worthful? Such persons used to offer Namaz. How their Namaz can be accepted? One's Namaz shall be pointless, who did not recognize the Prophet and Imam." (Bombay, 17th October, 1885)

"There were many different kinds of people in the plain of Karbala, and some among them admitted Imam Hussain as an Imam." (The Imam quoted a Persian couplet in this context, meaning), "Imam! Imam they accoladed, but martyred their own Imam."(Bombay, 17th October, 1885)

On 12th Muharram/October 12, however, when the Umayyad forces left Karbala, the people of Banu Asad from the nearby village of Ghadiriya came down and buried the bodies of Imam Hussain and his companions on the spot where the massacre had taken place.

In 1981, I have been reliably told by an Ismaili scholar that one anonymous Arabic manuscript is accessible in the museum of Paris. It belonged to a person of Banu Asad, who also joined in the burial ceremony of the martyrs. He wrote that the people washed the dead bodies, not from the water of Euphrates River, which was 25 yards away, but with the water of a stream inside the tent of Imam Hussain. It implies that a stream was got sprung in the tent. This fact is not ascertained from any sources. Vazir Ali Muhammad Jan Muhammad Chunara (1881-1966) however mentioned in his **Nurun-Mubin** (1936, p. 32) that, "When all the relatives and companions of Imam Hussain were killed, he came in the tent to have a last meeting with his household and Zayn al-Abidin. On that moment, he stroke his sword on the ground with the power of his Imamate and sprang a stream of water. He quenched the thirst of the thirsty ones and satisfied them."

Soon after the battle, Tabri (2:369) writes, "Seventy-two heads were raised on the points of the lances, each of them were held by one soldier, followed by the women of the Prophet's family on camels with the huge army of the Umayyad." Their caravan reached Kufa and then in Damascus. It is absolutely a baseless story of the later historians that the family of the Prophet was insulted and women's heads were uncovered on their way to Kufa. Imam Sultan Muhammad Shah said, "You are reading the narrative of Hazrat Imam Hussain, which is not authentic on the whole. It contains many fabrications of the *mullah*. The genuine story is in my house....The battle of Karbala was fought, in which Shimar martyred Imam Hussain, but those stories are fake (indicating) that they insulted Ahel Bayt, their (women) heads were uncovered or stretched their hands towards them (women). It was not their power. If it would have been done, (they) will have become stones. They martyred Hazrat Imam Hussain and arrested (members of) Ahel Bayt, but they did not disgrace them." (Zanzibar, 20th August, 1899)

In short, the followers wrote letters from Kufa to the Imam, inviting them to come for their rescue. When Imam Hussain arrived, they hid in their homes and did not come out. After an end of the battle of Kerbala, Bibi Zainab is reported to have rebuked the Kufans that they invited his brother and then retreated. Maulana Rumi referred to it in a narrow compass with the illustration of the animals and birds in his **Mathnavi** about

the Kufans. He writes that once the animals and birds fought in a forest, in which the animals were victorious and the birds fled away. The animals saw a bat on a tree, arrested it to kill because it was a bird. The bat said, "I have wings like bird, but it does not mean that I am a bird. Does any bird suckle except the bat? This peculiarity is only in the animals, therefore. I am an animal." The animals released the bat. After some days, the second round of the fighting took place between them, in which the birds were victorious, and animals took flight. The birds saw the bat on a tree and arrested to kill. The bat said, "I can suckle my baby like the animal, it does not mean that I am an animal. There is not a single animal having wings like me, because I am a bird like you." The birds released the bat. After some days, the third round of fighting ensued between them and on that occasion, they came to the compromise. The animals and birds together arrested the bat and asked, "Let us know either you are an animal or bird?" This time the bat could not say anything. Both the animals and birds hang the bat on a tree before the scorching heat of the sun. It badly affected its body and eyes. Since then, the bat became absolutely black and cannot see at day time. Here the bat refers to the Kufans who invited Imam Hussain by pledging that they were with him. When Ibn Ziyad, the Umayyad commander treated the Kufans with iron-handed, they advanced their loyalty towards the Umayyad. Soon after the battle of Kerbala, Bibi Zainab rebuked them, but they did not reply anything. Since then, their condition as per Rumi's example is like the bats.

