

Dhakiri

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Article

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Evolution of Dhakiri

The term 'Dhakiri' (dh-aa-ki-ree), whatever its dictionary meaning or etymological derivation, has always been understood to relate to the remembrance of the tragedy of Karbala' in 61 A.H. With all its cultural variations and linguistics differences it has a central religious content.

This is essentially to hold mourning ceremonies for the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (a.s.) and his companions as well as the brutal and inhuman manner in which the survivors of the house-hold of the Holy Prophet (S) were taken prisoners, paraded through the cities of Iraq and Syria and finally brought before Yazid, the architect of the carnage and unparalleled atrocities.

Today we find these mourning ceremonies are held by our Shiah brothers and sisters in every continent. However small a community, with the advent of the months of Muharram and Safar the community leaders look for dhakirs to help the members in their aza' al-Husayn. The tragic tale remains the same. There is nonetheless a growing vigour amongst the participants in the aza'. The hearts cry out "Ya Husayn!", the tears flow uncontrollably at the very mention of the name of a martyr. The audience may have heard it all hundreds of time, and yet the sorrow and grief never seem to abate.

To a dispassionate observer all this may seem to be incomprehensible. Yet he can not but appreciate the underlying strength of character, the devotion of the participants to their Imam and his followers and the determination of the traders, industrialists, working men and women and the youths constituting the community to preserve their identity as Shiahs.

This is our resource. This is our strength. This is our dormant volcano which can unleash the lava of spirituality to enlighten not only the Muslim ummah but also the entire mankind. Sadly they remain as yet not fully exploited. In this paper I propose to suggest ways and means of how best we can tap this vast energy within aza' al-Husayn for the betterment of the community.

Let me make it clear. None of my suggestions is original. Some of them I have heard many a times from our 'ulama. Mulla Asger has also on many occasions discussed them from minbar as well as at those meetings which I have had the privilege to attend. I would, therefore, request you take this paper as a collation of what I have heard and read.

The first majlis al-Husayn was recited in the market-place of Kufa by a lady from whose head her veil had been ripped off, whose hopes and aspirations had been destroyed on the blood-drenched sands of Karbala' but whose indomitable spirit stepped forward to free the Islamic values from the yoke of tyranny

and oppression. Standing on her unsaddled camel, she looked at the multitude rejoicing the victory of Yazid. As soon as people saw her, they were quiet. They knew that a historic moment for Kufa had arrived. Looking straight at them, the daughter of 'Ali said:

“Woe upon you O people of Kufa. Do you realise which piece of Muhammad’s heart you have severed! Which pledge you have broken! Whose blood you have shed! Whose honour you have desecrated! It is not just Husayn whose headless body lies unburied on the sands of Karbala’. It is the heart of the Holy Prophet. It is the very soul of Islam!”

The first majlis touched and moved the people of Kufa so deeply as to give rise to both the Tawwabun movement and al-Mukhtar’s quest for vengeance.

When the news of tragedy reached Medina in the third week of Muharram there was such intense weeping and wailing from the homes of Banu Hashim that the very walls of masjidun-nabawi began to tremble. Zainab, Umme Luqman, the daughter of Aqeel ibn Abi Talib came out screaming: “What will you say when the Prophet asks you: “What have you, the last ummah, done with my offspring and my family after I left them? Some of them are prisoners and some of them lie killed, stained with blood. What sort of ajr al-risaalah is this that you disobey me by oppressing my children ?”

Fatimah Bint Huzaam, also known as Ummul Baneen, carried her young grandson Ubaidullah ibn Abbas and prepared to go out. When asked where she was going, she said that she was taking the orphan of Abbas to offer condolences to the mother of Husayn.

Marwan ibn Hakam reports that every afternoon men and women would gather at Jannat-ul-Baqee and there would be remembrance of the tragedy of Karbala’ and the weeping and wailing could be heard miles away.

When the prisoners were finally freed by Yazid, Bibi Zainab asked for an opportunity to have rites of remembrance in Damascus. A house was made available to them and aza’ al-Husayn went on for over a week. Bibi Zainab (a.s.) laid the foundation of aza’ al-Husayn in the very capital of his murderer!

On their return to Madina, Bibi Zainab (a.s.) took over the leadership of aza’ al-Husayn in the city of the Holy Prophet. This aroused such strong emotions in the people and such revulsion against the oppressor that Amr ibn Said ibn al-Aas wrote to Yazid to have Bibi Zainab exiled from Madina. This was done in the beginning of 62 A.H. Bibi Zainab (a.s.) died shortly afterwards.

We have no record of public orations by our Imams about the tragedy of Karbala’. We have, however, several ahadeeth about the merits of participating in the mourning ceremonies. In this connection we must remember that the regime was hostile to the shiahs and was anxious to cover up the tragedy of Karbala’.

Imam Zainul Abideen (a.s.) is reported to have said:

“When a believer’s eyes shed tears for the death of al–Husayn until they flow over his cheeks, Allah will provide for him rooms in Paradise which he will inhabit for a long time. When a believer’s eyes shed tears until they flow over his cheeks because of the atrocities inflicted upon us by our enemies in this world, Allah will provide him with a true abode in paradise.”

Ibn Qawlawayah p. 103

Imam Muhammad Baqir (a.s.) issued a directive which gave a definite form to the keeping of the memory of Imam Husayn (a.s.) alive. He recommended that for those believers for whom it was possible and convenient they should go for the ziyarah of the grave of Imam Husayn. For those for whom it was not possible or convenient, they should gather together and hold mourning ceremony and weep.

Ibn Qawlawayah p. 104

There is also the following tradition reported from the fifth Imam:

May Allah have mercy on a man who meets with another in order to remember our situation. There will be an angel with them who will seek forgiveness for them.....If you gather together and occupy yourselves in remembering us, then our memory will be kept alive in your meetings and remembrances. The best of people after us are those who remember our situation and urge others to remember us.

Ibn Qawlawayah p. 174/5

It is reported that al–Fudhayl Ibn Yasaar came to pay his respects to the Imam Ja’far Sadiq (a.s.)

After the exchange of usual courtesies, Imam asked al–Fudhayl: “Do you people ever organise majaaalis to recall the martyrdom of Imam Husayn?” Al–Fudhayl, with tears pouring down his eyes, replied: “Yabna Rasulillah, indeed we do.” The Imam said: “May Allah bless you. I highly approve of such majaaalis.”

On another occasion, the poet Ja’far ibn Iffaan recited to our Imam al–Sadiq a poem on the tragedy of Karbala’. The Imam began to weep uncontrollably. He then addressed the poet in the following terms:

“O Iffaan, do not think that it is only those whom you can see here are listening to your poetry. In fact Allah’s closest angels are present here at this majlis and they are all listening to your recitation and they too lament and weep. May Allah bless you for what you have recited. He will, inshallah, reward you with paradise for your efforts on our behalf.”

It must be borne in mind that the Arabs mostly expressed their emotion through poetry. Poetry thus became the medium of describing the horrors of the tragedy of Karbala’, the cause of Imam Husayn and the atrocities which the Ahulul Bayt were made to endure. There are today extant several poems which the poets recited in presence of our holy Imams and as such can be regarded as having been approved by them both as to form and substance.

The only historical account in prose that was written not long after the massacre of Karbala' was that of Abi Mikhnaf. His account is relied upon both by Tabari and Shaykh Mufeed (A.R.). Many other accounts were written and published after the ghaybah. The most well known amongst these are the Aamali by Shaykh Suduq (A.R.) and the great work of Allamah Majlisi (A.R.), the Bihar-ul-Anwaar.

While we have evidence of many eminent fuqaha and muhadditheen lecturing to their students on the various aspects of Karbala', we can not assert with any confidence that they delivered public lectures on the subject. It is, however, authoritatively reported that Shaykh Allamah Majlisi and Shaykh Shushtari, whenever they spoke, whether to the students or in the public, they would end their lecture with a brief reference to the masa'ib of Imam Husayn.

It is possible that during this early period, whenever the circumstances permitted, dhakirs began to appear and occupy the minabir to acquaint the people with the tragedy of Karbala' and the cause of Imam Husayn (a.s.). Poetry must always have played a part in the rendition of masa'ib. I recollect that in my childhood during the masa'ib the account would be interspersed with short poems, which were known as bandh.

Philosophy of Dhakiri

Aza' al-Husayn is a force that can be mobilised to take the community to the pinnacle of spiritual enrichment. The people who can make us attain this objective are our dhakirs. They have the undivided attention of their audience during the months of Muharram and Safar. The audience is there willing and waiting to surrender their emotions to the words of the dhakir. This also prepares them to listen to and imbibe the account of the cause of Imam Husayn (a.s.), the basic values of Islam and what is expected of them as good Muslims. They would be willing to be placed in the 'discomfort zone' by some home truths from the dhakir, so long as the dhakir does not go into personal attack of any person or group.

We must never lose sight of the fact that we have only two institutions to impart knowledge of Islamic precepts, ethics, the basic values and to deal with social and other problems confronting the community. One is the madressa and the other is the majaalis. For the adults and the youths no longer in the madaaris they have only one forum for spiritual enlightenment. This is the majaalis.

There may be dhakirs who may feel that in order for the masa'ib at the end to have the maximum impact they should not disturb the community's personal equilibrium by transporting them to a discomfort zone. For this reason some of us prefer to devote the earlier part of the majlis by narration of munazirah or fadhail, often employing linguistic acrobatics, talking much, saying very little of any use to anyone.

In October 1984 the Irani magazine al-Tawheed published an editorial which was an eye opener to me. In my opinion it encapsulates the entire philosophy of dhakiri. For this reason I feel I must share excerpts from that editorial with you. Please forgive me for subjecting you to such a long quotation:

“Mourning ceremonies,” writes the editor, “are held by Muslims throughout Muharram and Safar, and in gatherings which are called ‘Majalis’, elegies are recited and sermons are delivered from the minbar in which the sufferings undergone by al-Imam al-Husayn, the members of his household and his companions are narrated. For the Shiah sect, the majlis and the sermons delivered therein are the primary source of religious education for the children, the illiterate and even educated adults.

“However, with the general decline and deterioration in the Muslim Ummah, of which the Shiah community is a part, the great educational potential of the majlis has slowly eroded, to the extent that not only the great educational purpose that lies behind mourning for al-Imam al-Husayn has been forgotten, the majlis has become a platform for intensification of sectarian animosities and propagation of misconceived beliefs that conflict with the spirit of the Islamic faith.

“The lamentable ignorance of the masses and the deplorable negligence or absence of the sense of duty on the part of many dhakirs have converted most majlis into mere sources of nourishment of sectarian conceits and delusions

“Shi’atism, which implies a voluntary and aware choice to shoulder greater responsibility as member of the Ummah and devoted obedience to the wajib al-‘ita`ah (i.e. those whose obedience is obligatory) Imams of the Household of the Prophet (a.s.), its meaning has gradually degenerated into a mere emotional attachment for the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.), devoid of any sense of ethical or social responsibility for the present-day condition of Islam and Muslims. We, the self-declared Shiah of al-Husayn ibn `Ali (a.s.), should pause and meditate at the answer given by him to a man who proclaimed to the Imam, “O son of the Prophet, I am one of your. Shiah.” Al-Husayn ibn `Ali (a.s.) said to him:

Fear God, and do not make such a claim that God, the Almighty, should say to you, “You lied insolently by making this claim.” Indeed our Shiah is one whose heart is free from every kind of deception, adulteration, hatred, malice, and corruption. If you are not such then say, “I am one of your admirers and supporters.”

“Whereas the Holy Book calls the believers to emulate the Prophet (S) as the most sublime model of humankind, “You have a good example in God’s Messenger for whosoever hopes for God and the Last Day, and remembers God oft. (33:21)

“The dhakir struggles to project the Prophet (S) and the Imams (a.s.) as supernatural beings to be admired and extolled, not to be imitated and obeyed. He strives to drive home the point that the Qur’an is understandable only for God or the Holy Prophet (S) or the Imams (a.s.), a book of sacred and abstruse meanings opaque to human understanding, a book so holy that it is impertinent even to try to understand it.

“The Qur’an and the ahadeeth lay great emphasis on the duty of al-‘amr bil ma’ruf wa al-nahy `an al-munkar, and it is recognised as one of the most important duties of Muslims in general and the ‘ulama in particular. Unfortunately this duty is discretely shunned by the dhakir who is averse to disturb the

complacency of his audience and to venture to guide them at the cost of his own popularity. The strategy of connivance, though full of perils in the Hereafter, yields immediate returns.

“The present situation in the Muslim world is no better than the conditions that prevailed during the later decades of the life of al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali (a.s.). All hallmarks of the Islamic culture have been washed away in the deluge of modern paganism. The greater part of the Muslim world is under direct or indirect domination of non-Muslims. The sad signs described in a prediction of al-Imam ‘Ali (a.s.) have already come true:

A time will come when nothing will remain of the Qur'an except its script, and nothing of Islam except its name. The mosques in those days will be flourishing with regard to architecture, but desolate with regard to guidance. Those staying in them and those visiting them will be the worst of all on the earth. From them mischief will spring up and towards them all wrong will turn. If anyone isolates himself from it (mischief) they will fling him back towards it, and if anyone hesitates, they will push him towards it...

“In such conditions how can any discourse about the great struggle of al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali (a.s.) be unaccompanied with a discussion of the lamentable condition of the Muslim Ummah? Is it not the height of callousness and even hypocrisy to pass by in silence the aims and ideals for which he took a stand against the regime of Yazid and sacrificed everything?

“Is it not the very extreme of injustice to deprive the Muslim children and adults of the great potential of the majalis which are held in the memory of Imam Husayn? Is it right not to use the great devotion of the Muslim masses to the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.) and their great enthusiasm and zeal during the months of Muharram and Safar—a time when the hearts are softened by the stupendous tragedy of Karbala” to receive the teachings of the martyrs who sacrificed their lives with al-Imam al-Husayn—to inform and educate our children and adults about the ahkam of the shariah and the Akhlaq of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.)?

“The Shiah have admired ‘Ali and his sons (a.s.), their leaders and guides, for centuries, and wept over accounts of their sufferings. Is it not time that we should start following them in deed, in all walks of our life? After all they are our Imams, our leaders and our teachers, who underwent those sufferings and hardships in order to instruct us and guide us on the Straight Path of Allah? Should we not question our sincerity if we persist in our refusal to be benefited by their efforts to improve our lot, to purify our souls and to guide our intellects?

“The majlis should inform and instruct. It should inspire and enlighten. Like al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali (a.s.), his dhakir, who occupies the minbar of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.), should aim at resurrecting the spirit of Islam and the message of the Qur'an.

“Only when our majalis become classes for dissemination of the teachings of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.) which lie buried in hadith texts, only when our majalis become platforms of Muslim unity instead of being instruments of division and disunity, only when our majalis and minabir become the seats of the duty of al-'amr bil ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar, only when the Qur'an is made again the book of our

life and the light of our majalis, only then can it be said that our majalis and minabir are doing justice to al-Imam al-Husayn (a.s.) and to the people whom the majalis were originally instituted to nourish spiritually, morally, and intellectually.”

Al-Tawheed Vol II: 1

Fourteen years have passed since that very painfully frank and poignant editorial was written and published. Sadly in most cases it is as applicable today as it was then. The community is torn by strife, self-interest, dissension and indiscipline. This situation must change. Only we the dhakirs can bring about that change.

Every dhakir must fully appreciate the fact that he sits on the minbar to continue the struggle of Imam Husayn and to endeavour and accomplish the cause of the great martyr. In order to fully comprehend this function we need to briefly examine the history.

From the day he left Madinah on the 28th Rajab in 60 Hijrah, at every stage, our Imam made his mission clear. He left no doubt as to his intentions. It was not to fight Yazid to get the throne of the empire over which the khalifah ruled. Imam's mission was to reawaken the spirit of Islam and rekindle the Islamic conscience which was nearing extinction by the conduct of Muawiyah and Yazid. Justice and morality were gradually being destroyed by the greed for land and power of those who had become rulers. Qur'an insists that distinction can be accorded by piety alone. Since the death of the Holy Prophet a social order had come into existence creating an aristocracy based on nepotism and blood relationship.

Let us look at some of the statements by Imam Husayn. Before leaving Madinah Imam Husayn made a will and handed it over to his brother Muhammad Hanafiya. In this will Imam wrote: “My mission is to reform the muslim community which I propose to do by **amr bil ma'ruf and nahy anil munkar**, inviting them to the good and advising them against evil. It is not my intention to set myself as an insolent or arrogant tyrant or a mischief maker”.

In Mecca Imam addressed a large group of scholars who had come for pilgrimage. He exhorted them to do **amr bil ma'ruf and nahy anil munkar** and not to pander to the philosophies of the rulers who paid them to keep away from truth. This was a long and powerful speech reminding the scholars of their duty to inculcate Islamic conscience and not to mislead the masses who trusted them.

The sole cause for which Imam Husayn set out from Madinah was to perform his duty to do **amr bil ma'ruf and nahy anil munkar** to the ummah which had not only apathetically accepted the evil that had been flowing from the court in Damascus but, sadly, begun to emulate it. The inevitable consequence of this would have been a total destruction of all Islamic values.

In a letter which he addressed to the people of Kufa Imam wrote: “An Imam is one who judges by the Holy Qur'an, upholds justice, professes the religion of truth and dedicates himself to obeying Allah and His Prophet.”

When Hurr and his army stopped Imam caravan from going to Kufa, and Hurr told Imam that his order from ibn Ziyad was to ask Imam for Bai'at to Yazid, Imam refused to declare Bai'at to someone who was only serving his own ends and not of Islam. Hurr said that such an attitude might cost Imam his life. Imam replied: "Are you threatening me with death? Death is many thousands of times better than the dishonour of Bai'at to an enemy of Islam. Do you not see that truth is not being practised and falsehood is not being prevented? I see death as a blessing and life with tyrants as the most disgusting state one can be in."

Imam addressed Yazid's army and concluded his speech with these immortal words: "My parents did not raise me to submit myself to an evil tyrant. I am your Imam and it is my duty to tell you that you have surrendered the freedom of your mind to the evil ways of Yazid. If you do not care for Islam, and do not fear the day of judgement, at least do care for that precious gift from Allah, the freedom of your spirit!"

And then, realising that there was none amongst the enemy who was prepared to heed to his advice, he climbs a sand dune and cries out: "Who is there who would help us?" Was our Imam crying out for someone to come and help him in his plight or assist him in the battle against the forces ranged against him? There was no one left. Hurr had come over and laid down his life. Even infant Asghar had been killed. Who was then our Imam calling out to? He was calling out to the future generations to continue his frustrated cause of doing **amr bil ma'ruf and nahy anil munkar**.

When a dhakir sits on the minbar he must remember that he has assumed the responsibility to help the holy Imam in his cause.

I would like here to make a respectful suggestion. We the dhakirs should during the months of Muharram and Safar repeatedly remind our audience that aza' al-Husayn is not a mere ritual. It is a commitment to Imam Husayn (a.s.). A commitment by each one of us, men and women, young and old, to uphold the values of Islam and to subordinate our hearts to the wishes of Imam Husayn. Aza' is our way of responding to his call of 'hal minnasireen yansuroona' and we shall be miserably failing in our response if we treated this most important institution as a mere ritual. The responsibility lies with us, the dhakirs, and if we fail to discharge this responsibility we shall be answerable to Allah SWT.

I seek your indulgence to make two final points.

Firstly, every dhakir owes it to the minbar to cultivate and safeguard his credibility through his conduct, speech and behaviour.

Secondly the community must recognise that if the important institution of majalis is to survive for the coming generations, especially here in the West, the reputation of the dhakirs should not be assailed in public, especially in front of one's children. This could create disillusionment not only with the dhakir but also with the institution of majalis.

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