

by Imam Zafrullah Domun

Summary: Start of New Year 1436 of the Islamic calendar. The Martyrdom of Imam Hussain. The indentured labourers in Mauritius.

After reciting the *Tashahhud*, the *Ta'uz* and the first chapter *Al Fatiha* of the Holy Quran Imam Zafrullah Domun said:

As from last weekend we have started a new year according to the Islamic calendar that was started by the second caliph Hazrat Umar (ra). Unlike others we do not mark this event by any special festivities. We just note that time is passing by and that another year in our life has gone by. In many parts of the Islamic world during the first ten days of the first month of the Islamic calendar many Muslims of the Shia sect celebrate the martyrdom of the grandson of the Holy Prophet (saw), namely Imam Hussein. He is remembered by Muslims and non-Muslims alike as being the embodiment of a fearless and courageous man who stood for truth against the peril of his life and that of his close ones.

The repercussions of his brutal murder and that of his companions by the forces of Yazid have had such an impact in history that they are still being felt today even after about 1334 years and they will continue to be felt in the future. Muawiya, the son of Abu Sufyan and the father of Yazid became caliph after the murder of Hazrat Ali (ra) in 660 AD. By then, that is in the late six hundred and sixties the old meccan aristocracy which opposed the Holy Prophet (saw) had reasserted their influence and they were again in a leadership position within the Islamic community. Although it is agreed by historians that Muawiya did much to consolidate the Islamic state and to expand it, yet he reverted to their old Arab traditions by naming his son Yazid to succeed him as caliph. Had Yazid been as good a man as his father maybe history would have taken another course. But he was a womanizer and a drinker of wine and was not at all given to acts of piety. But being a politician he understood that if there were one man in the community which could challenge him and his authority it was brave Hussein, the son of Ali and grandson of the Holy Prophet (saw). So he wanted to have the allegiance of Hazrat Hussein in order to ensure no one would challenge his authority. On accession he asked all governors to get the allegiance of the people to him. At that time Hazrat Imam Hussein was in Medina. He and Abdullah Ibn Zubair refused to declare their allegiance to Yazid on the point that Khilafat was not a hereditary monarchy. They escaped to Mecca and from there they planned to go to Kufa in Iraq where a large party of Muslims were apparently willing to welcome them. Unfortunately events did not unfold as expected and Hazrat Imam Hussein was butchered together with his close ones in Karbala. As I have just said the events of Karbala were so brutal that it has been a sort of rallying point for all Muslims since then.

I will tell you what some of those who have studied these events have to say about these events. Professor Hitti who is well known for his book "*History of the Arabs*" says "The blood of Hazrat Hussein even more than that of his father proved to be the seed of the Shiite sect. Karbala gave the Shiite a battle cry which will eventually lead to the fall of the Umayyad "about sixty years later. Another historian by the name of Gibbon who wrote the "*Decline and fall of the Roman empire*" says "the tragedy of Karbala was so overwhelming that through ages and every clime it has continued to awaken the sympathy of the coldest reader. The day of the martyrdom of Hazrat Hussein is observed throughout the Muslim world with great mourning." A Muslim scholar Yusuf Ali wrote in his book "*Hazrat Hussain's martyrdom*": "the imam chose the path of danger with duty and honour, giving up his life freely and bravely. His story purifies our emotions."

Sir Mohammad Iqbal, the renowned poet of Pakistan wrote several verses in praise of Hazrat Hussein. Here are some:

"When Khilafat strained its relationship with the Qur'an and abandoned Islamic and Quranic ideals by transforming it into a kingship and when freedom was poisoned, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) did not tolerate its injustices. Like a blessed cloud he marched forward and through his rain of blood transformed the desert into a garden of martyrs. By doing so he ended the reign of injustice and breathed new life into the garden of freedom."

"Moses and Pharaoh and Hussain and Yazeed. These forces have been in struggle from the beginning. The lamp of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has always faced off with the spark of Abu Lahab."

"I have learned the secrets of Qur'an from Husain. I have inflamed my lamps through Husain's candle."

"Message of truth and justice is alive due to the sacrifice of Husain who defeated injustice forever. It was to save justice and truth that Husain and his companions bathed in their own blood. By following this path they renewed the foundations of Islam."

Before I make some comments on these verses let me tell you what immediately happened after Karbala. There was a violent reaction on the part of the Muslims of Medina to the events of Karbala. They repudiated their allegiance to Yazid and they drove the governor out of the city. In Mecca also there was a revolt and Abdullah bin Zubair declared himself caliph and the people of Mecca vowed allegiance to him. But Yazid could not rest. He sent a force of about 12000 men led by Muslim bin Uqba to quell the rebellion in Mecca and Medina. On his arrival in Medina from Syria Muslim bin Uqba gave the people of Medina three days to return to the allegiance of Yazid. The people of Medina rejected his offer. A battle took place on 26th August 683 outside Medina and the people of Medina were defeated. They had no choice but to renew their allegiance to Yazid and the governor returned.

After suppressing the revolt in Medina the army went to Mecca and they occupied the surrounding heights and pounded the city for about 64 days. Then they heard that Yazid had died and they retreated. Yazid was 38 when he died. His three year reign has been catastrophic for the Muslim Umma. His son Muawiya II succeeded him. He was only twenty and although rather pious he did not have any desire to assume the leadership position. He abdicated after sometime and the caliphate was passed on to Marwan I. When asked why he did not name a successor he said "I have not tasted the sweetness of the caliphate. Therefore I will not take upon myself its bitterness."

This was how events unfolded more than 1300 years ago. But unfortunately such events have been repeated several times during these past 1300 years. Those who are in authority think that the aura of their authority is sufficient to force others to kowtow to them. Such people have a Yazid-like nature and all those who resist them are Hussein-like. The Yazidis because of their superior number can have temporary and temporal triumph but in the eyes of Allah they are nothing even if they exercise authority. Any exercise of authority that does not promote justice and does not treat all alike is not good at all in the sight of Allah. As a Muslim what is important is not whether we can increase our number or our finances but how far we can make the necessary sacrifices to lead a life that is pleasing to God and does not harm any human being. Those who define the exercise of authority otherwise within a Muslim context have to argue and present arguments to that effect.

Imam Hussein stands as an embodiment of courage, of virtue, of fearlessness, of a true representative of his grandfather the Holy Prophet (saw) and of his valiant father Hazrat Ali. He was a man who did not care about his material wellbeing and that of his close ones in the face of injustice and brutal force. He stood for principles and sacrificed material wellbeing. He has left for all Muslims to come an example of someone who could look danger in the face and not blink for an instance because he knew he stood on firm grounds in the sight of Allah. Forever he will be revered for the stand that he took and he will continue to be an inspiration to all Muslims the world. May his soul rest in peace and may we all learn from his example and stand for our values and principles whenever there are contrary forces which want to wipe us away.

In the last part of our sermon we will say a few words about the indentured laborers who started coming to Mauritius in the year 1834. It is in commemoration of that arrival that a public holiday has been decreed in Mauritius since some time now. This year on 2nd of November in Mauritius we will be commemorating the 180th anniversary of the arrival of the first indentured laborers who arrived here on the ship named Atlas. There were 36 of them (30 males and six females). They came from Bihar, a place in India. Their contract of employment was for five years and the men were to be paid 5 rupees per month and the women 4 rupees. They had boarded their ship on 15th September at Calcutta. So they travelled for about 49 days before they arrived here in Mauritius. They arrived a Sunday afternoon. After all formalities were completed they alighted in the old Customs house near the Aapravasi Ghat only on the next Tuesday morning i.e on 4th November. These were the pioneer laborers that

the English lured to about eighteen other of their colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific.

Later that same day, these coolies as they were called were taken to Belle Alliance Sugar Estate near present-day Piton, in Rivière du Rempart. In 1834, Belle Alliance was owned by Hunter-Arbuthnot & Company and it stretched over an area of 502 acres and had a workforce of between 190 to 200 slaves. The Indian laborers worked from sunrise to sunset, six days a week and they were also required to perform light duties on Sundays. Thus, they worked side by side with the slaves of Belle Alliance in the sugarcane fields. That was prior to the abolition of slavery of course. Once the English saw that their experiment in Mauritius was successful they exported it to their other colonies. Today historians say that the English replaced slavery with the Indian laborers which was a disguised form of slavery. All this they did so that they might have enough sugar to eat in England. The cheap labor that these laborers represented was amply available in India. So between 1834 and 1910, around 451 796 Indian laborers (346 036 males, 105 760 females) were brought to Mauritius. During that same period, around 294 257 laborers remained in the colony, while 157 539 (128 761 males, 28 778 females) returned mostly to India, with some migrating to Natal in South Africa, British Guyana, Trinidad and Fiji.

Today most Mauritians of Indian origin are descendants of these pioneering laborers who left their country of birth to look for a better life elsewhere. The working conditions of these laborers remained almost unchanged for about eighty to eighty five years. The sugar planter's barons mistreated the laborers and at times even restricted their freedom. They imposed a double cut system which meant that they would lose two days of payment if they absented themselves only for one day. At times they even did not pay the laborers their dues. Eventually they were forced to pay after complaints were filed and investigations were carried out by the British magistrates.

To be brief we all should remember that most of our grandparents came here as migrants and we should know that we share this experience with all the inhabitants of the island. I hope we can get another forum where we could speak in greater details about the experience of the indentured laborers in Mauritius and elsewhere. For those who are interested I suggest that they download the report by the Truth and reconciliation commission which is available at the Prime Minister's office and read it. It is only then that most Mauritians might come to understand how much we all share in common and how much we should value what we share together. It is unfortunate that politicians who speak about "one people" will always try to divide the people to further their own sectarian agenda. I hope and pray that Allah gives us a new breed of country leaders who can really unite the people and help all to scale new heights in country and human development.

(The information about the indentured laborers comes from a press article by Dr Satteeanund PEERTHUM & Satyendra PEERTHUM.)