

Karbala: Two centuries ago

By Gautam Pingle

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As long ago as April 1802, Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, a Shia Muslim from Musheerabad in Bengal, traveled overland back to India from England, where he had gone by ship and arrived in Karbala.

He reported that less than a year before his arrival:

“ (While) the greater part of the respected inhabitants of Karbala having gone to pay their devotions at the Shrine of Najaf, 25,000 mounted Wahabis, on Arab horses and swift camels, made a sudden incursion from the desert and, being in league with some persons inside the town, shortly made themselves master of the place.

“After having massacred and plundered the inhabitants for many hours, they left at sunset..... During the short time, the Wahabis remained in the town they murdered 5,000 persons and wounded twice that number. They also plundered all the inhabitants, of gold, silver and everything that was valuable.”

The Wahabis had tried to cut away the golden tiles with which the great tomb was covered (a donation of the Kejar Kings of Persia) but could not do so because they were bolted firmly. Abu Taleb recounts that, after the Wahabis from the desert left, the “wandering Arabs” – possibly Bedouin - entered Karbala and completed the dreadful job, which occupied them for two days.

They carried off all the copper and heavy articles that the Wahabis had not thought worthwhile taking. Poor Karbala had not recovered even after a year and Abu Taleb says the residents were full of the recent tragedy and could speak of little else.

He also tells of the Turkish Imperial Army that sent from Mosul to protect Najaf from the Wahabis but instead desecrated the sacred shrines when they arrived. For Abu Taleb, the Wahabist movement was a phenomenon of which he was till then unaware.

He describes the founder, Abd al Wahab, as one who was born in Hilla on the banks of the Euphrates, raised as an adopted son in the Nejd in Arabia and then returning to Najaf after spending time in Isphahan, Khorossan and Ghazni.

The proposition he made forcefully around the year 1757 was that a true Muslim should not let anyone or anything to be “associated” with Allah- the Supreme Being. Anyone who did was considered an idolater and infidel.

Abu Taleb says the massacre at Karbala was accompanied by the cries of “Death to the Associators” and “Death to the Infidels”. According to the Wahabis, tombs, dargahs, even prophets were only standing in the way of the believers and their God. Abu Taleb comments that the Wahabis by then controlled all the towns of Arabia except Muscat, Medina and Mecca.

He also describes their raid on Mecca and Jeddah and the destruction of tombs in Mecca and the ransom extracted from the Sheriff of Mecca who took refuge in a ship on the Red Sea. Abu Taleb, however, commends them for their simple manners and moderation in their desires despite their great power and collection of immense wealth.

But, he says, the people of Baghdad, Basra and Hilla, as well as those of Najaf and Karbala, lived in daily dread of an attack by the Wahabis. Mirza Abu Taleb Khan has a great deal of contempt for the Turks though he is traveling under the passport issued by Constantinople.

He usually ascribed anti-Shia bias to most of them though he does come across some Turks (“though Sunni”) who are graceful and respectful to the Shia shrines, of which they were superintendents.

He comments that the Turks are universally hostile to the Shia sect. He says that the reason attributed locally for their toleration of the Shia shrines was the fear of intervention by the (Shia) Kings of Persia.

But he thinks it is really because of the income earned from Shia pilgrims and donations from Persia and India and “it is to Turkish avarice that we are indebted for the freedom enjoyed here (in Karbala)”.

He has a poor view of local buildings, saying that even the palace of the Pasha of Baghdad and the best building there was not equal to the houses of the middle class in Lucknow, much less to the palaces of the Nawab Asaf-ud-Doula of Oudh or of his Minister, Hussain Reza Khan.

From Constantinople to Basra, he contends he never saw a single house that would have been considered respectable - let alone comfortable - by a person of moderate fortune in Lucknow. Abu Taleb details an interesting story of one of the two canals in Najaf - the Husseiny and the other called ‘Neheri Hindue’ or ‘Neheri Assuffy’.

The Nawab of Oudh financed the latter: “It was larger than the Husseiny and it is as broad as a tolerable-sized river.” The Nawab’s intention was to ensure supply of ample

water from the river Euphrates to Nejaf, the burial place of Ali.

However, it had already cost Rs. 10 lakhs, which was equivalent to 125,000 English pounds, and the work was still continuing in 1802.

This was “due to the duplicity of the Pasha of Baghdad and the malversation (misconduct) of the superintendent” - who, instead of taking a direct route, made it wind through Kufa and other towns.

At the time Abu Taleb was there, it was still four miles away from Najaf!

What was intended as a drinking water canal for the holy city of Najaf had been converted into an irrigation canal for the surrounding areas! It brought prosperity to the area through which it was dug, improving soil fertility, allowing crops to be grown and creating employment. Abu Taleb comments that: “Nor are the people of Iraq ungrateful but daily offer up prayers and supplications for the Nabob’s eternal salvation and never mention his name but with rapture and enthusiasm.” Money well spent, though for a cause not intended by the donor.

--OPINION

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