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Muharram in Srinagar

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A photo essay on the unique Muharram processions in Srinagar; scenes from this year's Muharram.

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Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar and one of the most sacred months in Islam. For millions of Shia Muslims across the world, it is a time of mourning and reflection. Ashura, the 10th day of Muharram, marks the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE.



In Kashmir, Muharram holds great emotional and spiritual significance. Men, women, and children participate in ritualistic marches and gatherings to honour the sacrifices made in Karbala. This photo essay is of Muharram in Srinagar this year.

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One of the most emotional expressions of mourning are the *latmiyas*. This rhythmic chest beating, accompanied by *nohas* – elegies – recited in Kashmiri, Urdu, or Arabic, is a physical expression of grief for the pain and injustice faced by Hussain and his family.

Mourners carry *alams*, banners of black cloth bearing Islamic symbols or names of martyrs. The *alam* represents Abbas, the flag-bearer of Hussain's army, who was martyred while trying to fetch water for thirsty children in the battle camp.



“Other symbolic items carried during the procession include *taboot*, which is a replica of Imam Hussain’s coffin, signifying martyrdom. Cradles represent the sacrifice of the infant Ali Asghar; and *taziya* are miniature shrines that symbolise the Imam’s mausoleum,” said Nidha, a participant in one of the processions.



Amongst the unique Muharram traditions in Kashmir are the mourning processions on the Dal Lake. On the ninth day of Muharram, mourners take to boats, carrying *alams* across the lake. The tradition dates to Dogra times.



On Ashura, the final day of Muharram, a horse is brought out in the main procession. “Zuljanah was Imam Hussain’s horse — loyal and brave. Even after the Imam was martyred, the horse didn’t leave. He came back alone to the tents, letting the family know what happened. In our processions, Zuljanah represents that grief, that loyalty, and the injustice that was done at Karbala,” Nidah said.



After the day’s procession, mourners commemorate *sham-e ghariban*, the night of sorrow when Hussain and his companions were martyred and their families taken captive. In Kashmir, people gather in dimly lit *majlis* halls or open spaces and recite *nohas* and *marsiyas* (laments) remembering the cries of orphans and survivors of Karbala.



For many mourners, the tragedy of Karbala is a lens through which they view present-day injustices. Global conflicts like in Palestine and Iran echo through the processions.



“Tensions in places like Palestine and Yemen make people feel the message of Karbala even more deeply,” Nidha said “More youth are participating, connecting the story of Hussain to today’s injustices. But Muharram is not political—it’s about moral values and standing against oppression everywhere.”

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