

**‘Ashura’** Refers to the tenth day of the first Islamic lunar month of Muharram. Many traditions suggest before Ramadhan was instituted in 624, Muslims used to fast on the day of ‘Ashura’ in line with Jewish customs of fasting on Yom Kippur.

‘Ashura is also is the day on which Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and a small number of his follower were massacred by the orders of a tyrannical ruler called Yazid (d. 684) at Kerbala, Iraq, in 680 CE. For Husayn, Yazid had established an unjust and corrupt society and had violated all moral and religious norms. When asked to accept Yazid as his ruler, Husayn responded that he would never submit to oppression and tyranny.

A battle took place on the day of ‘Ashura’ in Kerbala. Despite putting up severe resistance against a numerically superior and a better-equipped force, Husayn and his companions were massacred and their bodies trampled. After pillaging Husayn’s tents, the women and children were taken as captives to Yazid in Damascus.

The massacre of Husayn was an important milestone in Shi‘a history as it affirmed notions of injustices endured by the family of the Prophet and exacerbated a passion for martyrdom. It also inspired Shi‘as to defy oppressive rulers.

Shi‘a communities mourn on this day all over the world. They observe ‘Ashura’ with lectures and the performance of various acts of devotion that are premised on culturally-generated symbols and rituals. South Asian Shi‘as, for example, have replicas or symbols of Kerbala in their centers. These include a special *dharikh* room, which often contains a depiction of the horse of Husayn and his sword and a symbolic representation of the *‘alam* (lit. a flag symbolizing bravery and courage) in the form of a palm, a cradle that symbolizes Husayn’s six month old child who was also killed in Kerbala, and other traditional replicas of shrines. The purpose of the symbols is to encourage weeping and devotion to the Shi‘a Imams.

Shi‘as will also flagellate, a term that includes the use of swords and knives to cut the head (*tatbir*), chains (*zanjir*), as well as striking of the chest (*matam*). *Tatbir* is the most violent of these acts and is practiced by only a small portion of the Shi‘a community. Another key element in the gatherings is a lecture and recollection of the martyrdom of Husayn in Kerbala, called *majalis*. These are lamentation assemblies where the stories of the martyrs of Kerbala are recited for the evocation of grief. In addition, the Imams’ virtues, miracles, and valor are recounted. The various rituals outlined precipitate individual and communal reflection insofar as they challenge the believers to base their demeanor on the paradigmatic actions of the Shi‘a Imams.