Published: December 15, 1994
Last Updated: August 7, 2015

DASTA

DASTA, the most common term for a ritual procession held in the Islamic lunar month of Moḥarram (q.v.) and the following month of Ṣafar, both periods of mourning for Imami Shiʿites. The procession commemorates the tragic death of Ḥosayn, grandson of the prophet Moḥammad and the third imam of the Shiʿites, on the plain of Karbalāʾ on 10 Moḥarram 61/10 October 680. The most spectacular *dasta*s take place on the actual day of the passion, known as ʿĀšūrāʾ (Plate IV), and on 20 Ṣafar, known as ʿArbaʿīn or Čella, the fortieth day after Ḥosayn's death.

In all parts of Asia ritual parades lamenting the unjust and sudden deaths of heroes have been performed almost from time immemorial. The mourning processions for Adonis/Tammuz in Mesopotamia and Sīāvoš in Transoxania, as well as the parade commemorating the slaughter of the Magi in Persia, known as Magophonia, are only a few examples. The *dasta* in Moḥarram and Ṣafar developed from simple parades into complex ambulatory rituals occurring annually among the Shiʿites of Persia, Iraq, Bahrain, the Turks of the Caucasus, and the peoples of the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent.

The most salient feature of the *dasta* is the self-mortifiers. These men, aged twelve years and up, are arranged according to height, the smallest in front. Some who strip to the waist (for greater exposure) and strike their chests with their palms are called *sīnazan* (chest beaters); others wear black shirts cut away in the back and beat themselves with chains directly on their flesh; they are known as *zanjīrzan* (beaters with chains). The *šamšīrzan* or *qamazan* (beaters [with] swords) wear white burial shrouds, symbolizing their

readiness to sacrifice their lives; they strike their foreheads with long daggers and swords, letting the blood drip down onto the shrouds (Plate V). All these acts of self-mortification are performed in time with the accompanying cymbals and drums. The leader of each subgroup chants dirges in the same rhythm. The entire *dasta* pauses from time to time in front of a religious edifice or the tomb of a local saint or in a large open space, where one group beats itself rhythmically while the others join in the chanting. The tempo quickens until the excitement reaches an uncontrollable pitch, and then the march continues. The cries of the participants, who curse the villains of Karbalāʾ while proclaiming sympathy for Ḥosayn and his companions in martyrdom, are mingled with these mournful songs. Elias Canetti, the Nobel Prize winner in literature, described these processions as “an orchestra of grief, and their effect is that of a crowd crystal. The pain they inflict on themselves is the pain of Ḥosayn, which by being exhibited, becomes the pain of the whole community. Their beating on their chests, which is taken up by the spectators, gives rise to a rhythmic crowd sustained by the emotion of the lament. Ḥosayn has been torn away from all of them and belongs to all of them together” (pp. 150-51)

The commemoration of the martyrdom of Ḥosayn is charged with extreme emotion, not only in Persia, but also throughout the Shiʿite communities of the world. The belief that participation in the annual observances will be an aid to salvation on the Day of Judgment is at least a partial motivation for many mourning rituals. The suffering of Ḥosayn and its commemoration thus became the very core of the Shiʿite faith. The *dasta* is the most common Shiʿite ritual. The first recorded public mourning ceremonies for Ḥosayn in this form took place in Baghdad in the 10th century. Amir Moʿezz-al-Dawla (334-56/945-67) of the Shiʿite Buyid dynasty ordered the markets closed on the day of ʿĀšūrāʾ in the year 352/963. Processions of Shiʿites then circled the city, weeping, wailing, and striking their heads in grief. The women were disheveled, and everyone wore torn, black clothing. Ḥosayn’s murderers were soundly cursed (Ebn Kaṯīr, p. 243)

In the early 16th century the Safavid shah Esmāʿīl I (907-30/1501-24) declared Shiʿite Islam the state religion of Persia, which provided not only legal sanction but also royal backing and encouragement for Moḥarram observances. In turn it was the popular form of Shiʿite Islam, including the *dasta* and other Moḥarram rituals, that helped to spread Shiʿite doctrine across the Persian plateau. Foreign residents, ambassadors, merchants, missionaries, and

travelers who spent varying lengths of time in Persia in the 17th and 18th centuries have left very rich accounts of what they saw. These accounts provide nearly a year-by-year record of the development of the pageantry of the *dasta*, chronicling increases in the number of participants costumed to represent various episodes in the battle of Karbalāʾ. Riders on camels and horses were followed by floats with living tableaux on wheels. Various attributes symbolizing the battle were incorporated: standards, banners, flags, guidons, ensigns, turbans, helmets, musical instruments, and a variety of weapons, including swords, axes, bows and arrows, lances, shields, and even firearms. Some of these weapons (e.g., the firearms) may seem anachronistic to westerners, but the Shiʿites are attempting by this means to erase the time that has elapsed since Karbalāʾ and to equate the present with the past. Decorative devotional items were also added to the *dasta*: rugs, mirrors, plumes, lamps, brocades and silks, all of which increased the spectacle. Some of these items were attached to biers and coffins or hung from standards (Plate VI). Each *dasta*, organized by special committees representing various divisions of the town or the guilds, follows a prescribed order and precedence.

In the 1930s Reżā Shah (1304-20 Š./1925-41) restricted Moḥarram rituals, particularly the *dasta* and the *taʿzīya* (passion) plays, on the pretext of their incompatibility with the program of modernization that he was trying to effect in Persia. In fact, however, the shah's move seems to have been at least partially motivated by fear that these powerful public displays could easily be converted into massive political demonstrations. The restrictions were continued under his son, but they failed to eliminate popular attachment to the Moḥarram rituals, as evidenced by their enthusiastic revival during the Revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79 and the advent of the Islamic Republic. In fact, they were among the instruments of mass mobilization for revolution and later for the war with Iraq (1359-67 Š./1980-88). The *dasta* organizations were strategically employed to bring hundreds of thousands of people into the streets of Persian cities to show support for both the Revolution and the fight until final victory in the war.

For a music sample, see Abbās Khāni – Navā.

For a music sample, see Nowhe of Men's Mourning.

For a music sample, see Nowhe Zeynab.

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Plate IV. Āšūrāʾ procession, with onlookers striking themselves on the head as the dasta passes, Mehrīz, 1977. Photograph K. Bāyegān.

Plate V. Dasta on ʿĀšūrāʾ, with šamšīrzan or qamazan in white shrouds striking their heads with swords or long daggers. After Zereschaguine.

Plate VI. Dasta with naḵl.