

# Citizen Tipu

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**Sabieh Anwar**

**A shining example to India and beyond, Tipu Sultan needs to be taken off his pedestal and onto the streets**

**M**uharram slipped past and millions mourned the loss of the Prophet's (pbuh) grandson. Husayn was a symbol of resistance against a kind of imperialism, and in his martyrdom there is a message for exploited communities in the third world. In this respect, the prince of martyrs becomes an asset not for Shias or Muslims alone, but for humanity at large. Juash Malihabadi (d 1982), a poet and freedom fighter, wrote in respect of Husayn's universal appeal:

*Wait for humanity to revive its soul, and you would listen,*

*'Husayn is indeed ours' will be the cry of every nation.*

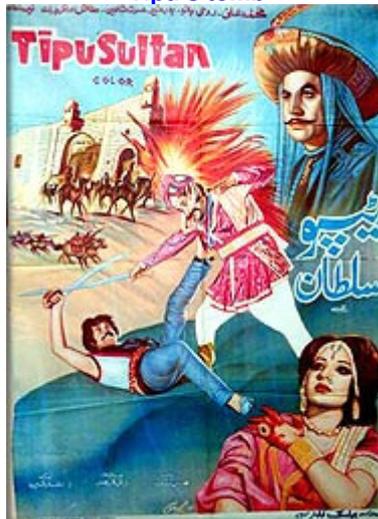
Though Husayn belongs to the past, his symbolism is eternal. Even today, as lands are being invaded and occupied, and minds and hearts are moulded in fire, the Husayni message rings loudly. There is a need to rediscover what he stood for, and to bring it to life once again.

The bloodstained motifs of history repeat themselves often. As we have forgotten the message of the son of Ali and Fatima even as we commemorate his death, we have erased from our memory the zealous spirit of the son of Hyder Ali and Fatima Fakhr-un-Nisa: Tipu Sultan, the last ruler of Mysore.

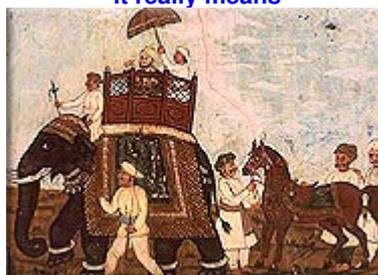
Amongst the many Persian quatrains inscribed around the mausoleum of Tipu



Iqbal at a mosque near Tipu's tomb



Seeing it on the screen is a long way from knowing what it really means



**Tipu kept with him a Persian translation of the American**

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Sultan in Seringapatam, one bears testimony to his connection with Husayn-ibn-e-Ali:

**Declaration of Independence and fired 108 cannon shots to salute the American victory over the British**



*From Fatima, the wife of Ali, the Lion of Lord,*

*Came the (grand) son of the Prophet (pbuh) and the king of martyrs,*

*Whereas from this Fatima and Ali Haider, was born,*

*Tipu Sultan who was to become the prince of martyrs.*

With Husayn's brutal murder, the hope of a creative self-governed political system faded before the imperialism of kingship. And with Tipu's end opened a new chapter in the life of India – foreign rule slowly engulfed the subcontinent, insidious and virtually unchallenged. Today we remember Tipu Sultan in our history books, in our television serials, and in a few scattered maxims such as his famous "A single day in the life of a tiger is worth a thousand years of a jackal's life". But in this superficial remembrance, perhaps we forget that in Tipu's life, ideals and final end there is much to teach us today.

In 1928 the poet Iqbal was invited by the Muslim Association of Madras to deliver a series of lectures in Madras and Aligarh. These lectures are now published in a book titled *Reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*. One of his main motivations for accepting this invitation was a chance to visit the land of Tipu Sultan, whom he admired from the core of his heart. His *Javaid Nama* was structured so that Tipu was the last person the traveller met on his cosmic journey, right before he was taken into the Divine presence. After Iqbal visited the tomb of the martyr he wrote a passionate tribute to Tipu's life, death and life again:

*The flame of pain has put a new fire on my essence,  
 I have come home with a message from Deccan.  
 'Tis like a crystal sword in my presence,  
 Which I can only slowly uncover from its sheath.  
 The martyr prince shared with me a secret,  
 That I fear, would embitter your Eid feast.  
 Before I could kiss the dust at his feet,  
 I heard a stately voice coming from his grave:  
 "If you cannot live a live of honour,  
 It's better to throw it away like men who are brave".*

## Resistance

"I am a war rajah, I make decisions with war on my mind." So Tipu would have said were he conducting a re-election campaign in the

1790s. At the time he was fighting on all fronts. He had sensed the political designs of the colonisers under the fancy of trade, and decided to challenge them with force, but also launched a massive diplomatic campaign with the French (Napoleon and King Louis XVI), the Ottoman caliph (Abdul Hamid I) and the ruler of Afghanistan (Zaman Shah). Napoleon, indeed, addressed him as “the most Magnificent Sultan, our greatest friend, our Tipu Sahib”. As the Mughal Empire slipped into virtual regency, Tipu became the last bulwark against the colonisers. The Marhattas and the nizam of Hyderabad had joined hands with the East India Company forces, and Tipu was among the few powers to wage a long series of battles against the foreigners and their collaborators, culminating in his eventual defeat in 1799.

It was at this defeat that the governor-general, Lord Wellesley, exclaimed “ladies and gentlemen, I drink to the corpse of India”. Tipu was killed in combat on May 4, 1799 and his body was found in a heap of “unknown” soldiers at the spot where the battle was fiercest. In celebration, the Muslim nizam of Hyderabad bestowed a pearl necklace upon James Kirkpatrick, the British Resident, on May 15. On October 4 the British parliament voted its gratitude to the army’s victory over the “last arrow in the quiver” of Indian resistance.

## Reforms

Despite being a ‘war president’ and living next to hostile neighbours, Tipu was not oblivious to the need for internal reform, tolerance and modernisation. His Code of Conduct, issued in 1787, is illuminating. In it he states: “to quarrel with our subjects is to go to war with ourselves. They are our shield and our buckler: and it is they who furnish us with all things. Reserve the hostile strength of our empire exclusively for its foreign enemies.”

Tipu engendered an egalitarian policy that in principle attacked all forms of exploitation. He abolished the custom of agricultural middlemen, principal government officers were denied the right to farm, and an upper limit was set on land holdings. Instead of gifting *jagirs* to his government officers and military men, he brought back reward lands into state control. This was the beginning of a land reform policy later followed in India. Unlike his British neighbours, Tipu kept intact the complex patterns of obligation and responsibility that were deeply rooted in the traditional economy of Mysore. In nearby Bengal, Lord Cornwallis cut through this traditional symbiosis and, by the stroke of a pen, the *jagirdars* who were tax farmers were made into landlords. This was repeated throughout British jurisdiction, and even today the subcontinent suffers from the effects of exploitative land ownership.

Traditional occupations such as trade, agriculture, livestock and textile, as well as novelties such as the pearl and ship industries, artillery and

iron foundries, all flourished under his rule. In his 1991 Tipu Sultan Shaheed Memorial lecture in Bangalore the Indian president Abul Kalam called him the inventor of the world's first rocket, which is kept at the Museum of Artillery in London.

In matters of social reform, we are told that Tipu was a great visionary. Gandhi regarded him as an “embodiment of Hindu-Muslim unity”. He banned the practice of human sacrifice and the trade of orphan girls and widows. He stopped the criminal punishment of flogging, calling it derogatory to human honour. On the question of banning liquor, Tipu Sultan's reasoning was simple: “It is not a question of religion alone. We must think of the economic well-being and moral stature of our people and the need to build the character of the youth.” As we talk of wars of “shock and awe” today, Tipu directed his warriors thus: “Looting a conquered enemy enriches a few, impoverishes the nation and dishonours the entire army. Wars must be linked to battlefields. Do not carry them to civilians.”

Tipu lived with and for civilians, and called himself “the first citizen of the Republic of India”. His contacts with distant states and empires exposed him to the new ideals that were sweeping across Europe and America. It is said that he kept with him a Persian translation of the American Declaration of Independence and considered the American struggle for freedom a role model for his own fight against the colonisers. On July 4, 1783, a year after his accession, Tipu fired 108 cannon shots to salute the American victory over the British. His close links with France led to the foundation of a Jacobin Club in Seringapatam, and a Tree of Liberty was planted there. Tipu himself is said to have worn a red cap, a symbol of the French revolution, and called himself “Citizen Tipu”.

In an age when much of the world was ruled by despots and India itself was enslaved by petty rulers, Tipu stands out as a modern, independent statesman who fought for the freedom of his people. Refusing to use forced labour for his palace, the Darya Daulat, he spoke to his ministers in 1789 about his hatred for a monument built upon the sufferings of humanity. “I believe its message is that here is the ruin of an empire founded on tyranny and anguish of the people driven from their homes, chained and enslaved so that a vain and haughty emperor might harbour illusions of his glory. There can be no glory or achievement if the foundations of our palaces, roads, dams are mingled with the tears and blood of humanity.”

## **Legacy**

Today Tipu's last stand against the East India Company and its allies is well remembered. But in remembering him in the past we forget the timelessness of his character and deeds. This is what happened both with Husayn and Tipu. Liturgies about the tragedy faced by the family of

the Prophet (pbuh) on the night of *ashura* can transport us to the battlefield in Karbala along the Tigris but while we are taken to Karbala, Karbala is seldom brought to us. Similarly, in our zeal of past-worship, Tipu has become an object of adoration, but not a subject of imitation. We need to recall that while Tipu Sultan belongs to the past, he speaks to us in the present.

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