

# BLOOD BROTHERS

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Every year on Ashura, the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Muharram, Shia Muslims mourn the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the prophet's grandson, at the battle of Karbala. In Hyderabad, India, men and boys commemorate the tragic events dating back to 680 AD, with symbolic bloodletting, rhythmic prayers and water distribution.

The story of Ashura is one marked by rifts. The battle of Karbala was a prominent event leading to the sectarian split in Islam. Tatbir, the act of mourning by symbolic bloodletting, is also highly controversial within the faith and many, including clerics, decry the practice as one of self-harm and thus Haram.

BLOOD BROTHERS is a photo essay looking at the fraternity that is built across mourners regardless of how they choose to express their grief. Representations of Ashura processions too often propose gory spectacles rendered through colourful stills. Others deliberately choose to omit such captures as a way of proposing counter-narratives. In BLOOD BROTHERS, I honour people's decision to grieve with symbolic bloodletting but equally turn the camera to moments of solidarity and support between mourners. I also choose the subdued tones of black and white analog photography to echo the black attire donned by mourners and propose a less sanguine rendition that honours and respects the decorum of the day.

BLOOD BROTHERS follows the Bibi-ka-Alam procession bringing together devotees from different Hyderabadi communities. For the occasion, the Alam, which is said to contain a piece of the wooden plank upon which Bibi Fatima, the daughter of Prophet, was given her final ablution, is mounted on the back of an elephant and taken through the street of the old city. Mourners follow the procession while chanting and rhythmically beating their chest, several with razor blades. Some self-flagellate with whips, chains or small swords. Others simply walk, with the palm of their hand resting on their chest. Bystanders distribute water to acknowledge the suffering from thirst that was endured at Karbala. Mourners help one another with bandages. Women and girls stand by and pay their respect from the sides of the street and balconies. While the day is important across the faith, mourning processions are not universal and some prefer to mark the occasion by donating blood, fasting or crying.