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EVERYDAY SHI'ISM IN SOUTH ASIA

WILEY Blackwell

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Everyday Shiʿism in South Asia

Karen G. Ruffle

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Transliteration Note

Everyday Shiʿism in South Asia traverses North and South India and Pakistan and multiple languages: Urdu, Persian, Arabic, Telugu, and Kannada, to name a few. Everyday Shiʿism is not confined solely to the Islamicate linguistic and literary domain; in this book I use a simplified transliteration system to provide maximum legibility for the reader across what may seem to be a dizzyingly diverse linguistic array. I do not use diacritical markers with the exception of *ʿayn* and *hamzah*. Indic and Islamicate words are italicized. For clarity, I use the English plural marker, "s," rather than systems of pluralization used in Arabic, Persian, or the Indian languages used in this book.

In several instances, there are terms that appear with enough frequency to warrant a brief explanation for my transliteration choices and the semantic range these spellings convey. *Taʿziya* are the replicas of Imam Husain's shrine tomb at Karbala that are displayed and taken out in procession during Muharram and are a core element of South Asian everyday Shiʿism. *Taʿziyeh* is an indigenous Iranian performance art genre in which the events of Karbala are re-enacted in dramatic *tableaux*. The Shiʿi practice of going on pilgrimage to the shrine-tombs of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, as well as to gaze upon and make offerings to *ʿalams* in *imambaras*, *imambargahs*, and *ʿashurkhanahs* is known as *ziyarah* (lit. "visitation"). A *ziyarat* is a prayer of salutation and benediction performed on ritually important occasions, such as when undertaking pilgrimage to an Imam's shrine-tomb, on *ʿashura*, or at the end of a *majlis* mourning assembly. These salutary prayers are made to the twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, Imam Husain, and other important Shiʿi sacred figures.

Introduction

On a bright, sunny day in Hyderabad's Old City during Muharram in 2005, I was in the lane leading to the house of my mentor, the late Dr. Sadiq Naqvi, a historian of Persian literary and cultural history at Osmania University, as well as a renowned orator (*zakir*; "one who remembers") in the Muharram mourning

assemblies. On the long, white-washed wall off Alava-e Sartauq Mubarak ʿ*ashurkhanah*, a centuries-old building where the metal standard containing a piece of the shackle that was placed around the neck of Imam Zain al-ʿAbidin – the only male survivor of the battle of Karbala, Iraq in 680 CE – is displayed throughout the year, I saw hanging a massive, black banner, so rich in visual and verbal detail that it stopped me in my tracks to stare at it for several minutes.

The tableau presented by the banner, its subsidiary banners projecting below, as well as the artfully placed potted plants, compelled me to snap a photograph. Over the years, I have taken thousands of photographs of Muharram rituals, Shiʿi built space and devotional objects, and it is to the image of this banner that I return again and again (see Figure 0.01).

Each chapter of *Everyday Shiʿism in South Asia* is informed and inflected by elements of this banner, whether it is ʿAbbas's ethic of care for family (represented by his severed arms and the arrow-pierced waterskin), Qasem's blood-drenched name (representing his battlefield valor and commitment to protecting his faith, despite being a newlywed husband), Zainab, whose voice and testimony serves as inspiration for Shiʿi devotional literature, and Zainab's young sons ʿAun and Muhammad (symbolized by two small water pots), who chose to fight like men on the Karbala battlefield while suffering terribly of thirst. The poet Millat's couplets add an aesthetic touch to the banner, while amplifying the emotional effect of the verbal and visual images:



Figure 0.01 Muharram banner, Hyderabad. Photo by author, 2005.

On ʿashura morning, deep in thought and with a

Grieving heart, ʿAbbas must now show bravery.

Elsewhere on the banner Zainab speaks poetically of her half-brother ʿAbbas's valiant sacrifice, and we also hear her tone of righteous indignation at the humiliations suffered by her family:

When Zainab laid eyes on ʿAbbas's arm,

She cried out, "Why not come, and cut the other, too?"

Another couplet encourages the devotee to consider the sacrifice of Imam Husain's six-month-old son ʿAli Asghar, whose throat was pierced by an arrow:

Until we live in the path of ʿAli Asghar,

We shall only feel shame.

That an infant would give up his life for the cause of family and faith is intended to give pause, to reflect on one's petty needs and concerns in the world.

This banner is not mere art, although it is certainly artistic. Nor is it simply a work of literary devotion to Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait. Shiʿi cultural memory is encoded in this banner graphically and visually in ways that are legible for South Asian Shiʿa, using symbols and linguistic terms of reference that are resonant and spiritually meaningful. While an outsider may look at this banner and see dripping blood, severed arms, prison doors, and arrows, an insider to the tradition will immediately understand how these images are coded and to whom each representation points. ʿAbbas's severed arms are viewed not with revulsion or fear by Shiʿa. Rather, they are viewed with a tremendous sense of love for his tender affection towards the children in the caravan suffering terrible thirst in the desert heat and deprived of water for three days. They remember ʿAbbas going on a suicidal mission to the banks of the Euphrates River to fill a waterskin, affectionately known as *mashk-e Sakinah* in memory of his beloved niece and Husain's youngest daughter, whose suffering he could no longer endure. The violence that is remembered is in relation to the caretaking ʿAbbas was doing for his family, particularly for the children who could not care for themselves, which brings tears to devotees in the mourning assemblies (*majlis-e ʿaza*) during Muharram.

This banner reflects an important dimension of everyday Shiʿism through which Shiʿi devotion to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait is grounded in emotional practices that mediate historical remembrance of the Karbala events, providing outlets for creative expression through ritual performances of the cultural memory of a violent act *without* violence. In Shiʿi cultural memory, the battle of Karbala was an act of shocking and horrific violence that was committed against the grandson and family of the Prophet Muhammad. It is through the shared cultural memory of the violence of Karbala, ritually performed through orations describing their

suffering, the recitation of poetry in the mourning assembly, the display of devotional objects, and through the performance of highly structured forms of self-flagellation (*matam*) performed with the hands and with instruments such as blades and chains, that individual and collective bonds of loyalty (*walayah*) and love (*mahabbah*) are reaffirmed each year.

Clifford Geertz's "Notes on a Balinese Cockfight" offers useful insight into how we might further understand this banner and how it is emblematic of the ethos of the everyday Shiʿism I present in this book. In his ethnographic study of the cockfight in Bali, Geertz came to treat this ritual performance of *a violent act without violence*, considering it "as a text is to bring out a feature of it (in my opinion, the most central feature of it) that treating it as a rite or pastime, the two most obvious alternatives, would tend to obscure: its use of emotion for cognitive ends. What the cockfight says it says in a vocabulary of sentiment … Attending cockfights … is … a kind of sentimental education. What he learns there is what is his culture's ethos and his private sensibility (or anyway, certain aspects of them) look like when spelled out externally in a collective text" (Geertz 1973, 449). The banner I photographed draws on key Karbala themes of sacrifice, suffering, violence, love, bravery, valor, kindness, faith, and generosity. This banner offers a microscopic perspective into the South Asian Shiʿi ethos and is a primer of religious sentiment.

The dense bundling of symbols and text on this Muharram banner demonstrates that for South Asian Shiʿa, memory of Karbala does not reside in an abstracted, remote past. While the *event* of Karbala happened in the historical past in 680 CE, its memory is embodied through social and cultural forms of production such as poetry, oratory, material objects, and built space. The banner is a mnemonic device, that is, it serves as a "reminding object" to help Shiʿa remember the panoply of Karbala events (Assmann 2015, 332). According to Jan Assmann, the forms that cultural memory takes are myriad and formalized as "narratives, songs, dances, rituals, masks, and symbols; specialists such as narrators, bards, mask-carvers, and others are organized in guilds and have to undergo long periods of initiation, instruction, and examination" (2015, 334).

This book is about the contours of everyday life and cultural memory of Shiʿi women and men, which is shaped by visitations to the shrine-tombs of saints, recitation of poetry, remembrance of the battle of Karbala, religious architecture and the devotional objects these buildings contain, festive events known as *jashn*, and different types of vows and votive offerings, all of which are inflected by perpetual devotion to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. The identities of these Shiʿa are also shaped by virtue of living in South Asia, by rank and status (whether one is *sayyid* or not), by the languages they speak, such as Urdu, Bengali, Sindhi, Telugu, Panjabi, or a range of other regional languages, and territorial affiliation to diverse locales, including Chennai, Ladakh, Kohat, Rampur, or Cambay. The vicissitudes of the 1947 Partition of the subcontinent into the postcolonial nation-states of India and Pakistan have further molded Shiʿi identities in the modern period. For Pakistani Shiʿa, one's status as a migrant citizen (*muhajir*) who came to the Muslim state from Lucknow or Delhi or elsewhere in India in the mass movement of people across the borderland constitutes a discursive domain in which "local" vs. "foreign" practices are negotiated and debated.[1]

Everyday Shiʿism

This book focuses on the everyday religious worlds of Shiʿi individuals and communities at particular historical moments and places in South Asia. I draw many of my examples from Hyderabad and the surrounding region, where I have conducted fieldwork on Shiʿi history, ritual, and material practices since 2003. I do not intend to make Hyderabad "speak" for all of South Asian Shiʿism, however, this is a place where I have spent extended periods of time. I have also studied and conducted fieldwork in Lucknow, India, and in Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi, Pakistan, from which I draw examples as well. In many of the chapters, I present topical case studies. Some of these case studies are like photographic snapshots. As a form of casual, amateur photography, the "snap" is usually intended for private use. These are the photographs that gather in shoeboxes or massed in digital drives. Snapshots tell stories of our everyday lives (Zuromskis 2013). A case study-snapshot approach reveals the domestic, private

dimensions of South Asian Shiʿism, which is one aspect of the everyday. My second approach is what I call the case study-microscopic, which affords fine-grained, close observation of everyday Shiʿism. The microscopic offers close analysis of public rituals, objects, and built space. While particularity may seem to preclude our ability to generalize about forms, functions, and meanings of everyday Shiʿism in South Asia, close study of a text, material object, architectural form, or ritual practice allows for an interpretive unpacking of the intersection of Shiʿi religious symbols, cultural values, and social systems in historical context.

The "everyday" reflects the central approach and ethos of this book, and I use the term in a number of ways. At the most basic level, the everyday refers to the activities of daily life that are inflected by Shiʿi religious laws, norms, ethics, rituals of belief and devotion,[2] and gender values. The everyday is an inclusive space that recognizes both women and men as active participants in Shiʿi religious life and practice without relegating women to the purview of "popular" religion and men to the "scholarly/intellectual" domains of the *daneshgah* or *howzah* (types of religious schools), mosque, or library. While one might consider the everyday to be a dimension of popular culture and religiosity, or within the domain of folklore, this leads to the formation of the essentializing and exclusionary binaries of popular-elite and everyday-scholarly that belie on-the-ground experience of South Asian Shiʿa. The everyday resists setting up an artificial binary that posits a divide between non-elite practice and the "religion of the scholars." The everyday is a space inhabited by all people, whether rich or poor, educated or illiterate, male or female. As we shall see in the following chapters, the concept of the everyday reveals the ways in which Shiʿi identities, like others, are multilayered, shaped by ethnic, linguistic, caste, and socioeconomic factors, as well as by gender and age.

Beyond being a site of resistance for our tendency to categorize identities and practices in binarized terms, the everyday is a space for the creative expression of Shiʿi devotion to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. The everyday is grounded by emotional practices that mediate Shiʿi historical memory and diverse South

Asian cultural practices and norms to cultivate an ethos of love (*mahabbah*), longing for, sadness, and loyalty to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. Connected to the emotional practices of the everyday are those which are embodied, referring to the multitude of ritual practices and literary forms that encourage Shiʿa to *feel* what individual figures such as Zainab, ʿAbbas, Qasem, or Sakinah endured at Karbala, and to imaginally share in their experiences through physical acts such as self-flagellation (*matam*) or applying henna to the hand in remembrance of the battlefield wedding of Husain's daughter Fatimah Kubra to his teenaged nephew Qasem.

The Shiʿi everyday is translocative, collapsing time and space between the historically and geographically distant sites in Arabia, Syria, and Iraq where the Imams and Ahl-e Bait lived and died. The everyday is not solely a construct or a condition of the present, although as scholars of religion we tend to be "presentist" in engaging this concept. The everyday is a method for situating Shiʿism and the Shiʿa – as individuals and communities – in specific spaces, places, linguistic registers, and sites of cultural exchange in the *longue durée*. Rooted in bodily, emotional, and material practices, everyday Shiʿism is intrinsically historical and social. The cultural anthropologist Monique Scheer writes, "The body thus cannot be timeless; it contains history at multiple levels. This consists not only of the sedimentations of evolutionary time, but also the history of the society in which the organism is embedded, and its own history of constantly being molded by the practices it executes" (2012, 201).

To understand everyday Shiʿism in South Asia requires an attentiveness to the interplay of history at many levels, the development of practice in evolutionary time, and the ways in which the "local" profoundly shapes religious worlds.

Center and Periphery Reconsidered

"If you want to know how Muharram was originally practiced, you should go to India." I frequently heard statements like this during the more than four months of field research I conducted in Iran in 2004, focusing on a Persian-language martyrdom narrative, *Rowzat-e shohadah* (The garden of the martyrs), written in

1502 by Mullah Husain Vaʿez Kashefi in Herat, Afghanistan (a text I shall discuss in more detail in Chapter 2). Such statements were not uncommon for me to hear from my Iranian interlocutors. For some, Indian Muharram was a historical anachronism, a ritual performance frozen in time. For others, it was untainted by the post-revolution political theology that shapes all aspects of life in Iran, including Muharram ritual. My time in Iran was a prelude and preparation for the 18 months of ethnographic and archival fieldwork that I undertook in Hyderabad, India in 2005–2006, studying how hagiographical texts and the rituals of the mourning assemblies, known as the *majlis-e ʿaza*, are powerful forms of moral communication in which shared historical memory of the battle of Karbala and the family of Imam Husain engenders shared emotional responses and an ethical worldview that shapes the everyday lives of South Asian Shiʿa.

With the migration of *sayyids*, that is, the blood descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, especially through his daughter Fatimah al-Zahra, Sufis, Shiʿas and other Muslim groups devoted to the first Imam ʿAli and his family have been settled in the Indian subcontinent for more than a millennium. The idea that the Indian subcontinent is a particularly hospitable place for Shiʿa is attested in the story of Ruqayyah bint ʿAli, the daughter of Imam ʿAli and Umm al-Banain, who survived the battle of Karbala, making her way to the Panjab region of contemporary Pakistan, which I discuss in Chapter 1. Seeking intercession (*shafaʿa*) for illness and other life challenges, Shiʿa and Sunni Muslims claim Bibi Pak Daman, the tomb-shrine in Lahore where Ruqayyah and her sisters and maid are buried, as sacred and connected to their religious and community histories. These early communities of Muslims who expressed devotion to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, which Teresa Bernheimer has described as "ʿAlid devotion" (2013), settled in all parts of the Indian subcontinent.

Many came to India as refugees fleeing persecution for their religio-political belief in the doctrine of the Imamate and ʿAlid devotion. Many practiced *taqiyyah*, the Shiʿi theological principle of precautionary concealment in the face of religious persecution. In their new homeland, they identified simply as

Muslims, that is, as Sunnis or through the socially acceptable guise of the ʿAlid devotion of Sufism. ʿAli is venerated by Sufis and Shiʿas for his deep spiritual wisdom, love, and steadfast dedication to God. With its origins in the message of the Qurʾan and the pious model of the Prophet Muhammad's *sunnah*, a group of Muslims beginning in the seventh and eighth centuries sought more experiential, decidedly renunciant approaches to encounter God. These early renunciants coalesced into a movement in the ninth century known as the Sufiyyah (wool-wearers), which gradually organized into institutional orders (*tariqah*), the lineages (*silsilah*) of which claim ʿAli as their spiritual forefather. There are exceptions, such as the Naqshbandiyyah, who consider the first caliph Abu Bakr (d. 634) to be the forefather of their spiritual order. Nevertheless, love for the Imams and Ahl-e Bait under the guise of *taqiyyah* provided one avenue for the solidification of Shiʿism in the Indian subcontinent.

Other Shiʿa found protection and patronage in Sunni courts throughout India, particularly following the Mongol invasions that swept through Iran, Iraq, and parts of Turkey beginning in the thirteenth century. From the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, large numbers of Iranian Shiʿa immigrated to the Deccan region of south-central India, where the five courts of the Deccan Sultanates embraced Shiʿism to varying degrees, as well as to the princely kingdom of Awadh, in the north. These immigrants came to seek their fortunes, attain fame, and to find courtly service as poets, theologians, soldiers, artisans, cooks, doctors, and bureaucrats.

These Shiʿi and Sufi migrants to the Indian subcontinent did not arrive empty-handed. As speakers of Persian, Arabic, and various Turkic languages, they brought with them a rich literary repertoire. New genres of poetry focusing on the Imams and Ahl-e Bait were introduced to the Indian subcontinent. The praise poem known as *manqabat* focusing on Imam ʿAli was introduced in India in the thirteenth century by Amir Khusraw Dehlavi, who is widely credited for being the "father of *qawwali*," a form of Sufi devotional music. Amir Khusraw's *manqabat* "*Man kuntu mawla fa haza ʿAli-un mawla*" refers to an event at Ghadir Khumm that took place in March 632 during the Prophet Muhammad's Farewell

Pilgrimage. Stopping at the wellspring (*ghadir*) at Khumm, located at the midpoint between Medina and Mecca, the Prophet gathered together his followers and declared, "Whomever accepts me as master (*mawla*), accepts ʿAli also as master (*mawla*)." Amir Khusraw's *hadith*-inspired *manqabat-qawwali* instills cultural memory of the Prophet Muhammad's appointment of ʿAli as his successor and inspires devotion to the first Imam. "*Man kuntu mawla*" remains a popular *qawwali* today and has been performed by such legendary singers as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (d. 1997), Abida Parveen, and the Sabri Brothers. Poems eulogizing the sufferings of Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait were widely introduced in South Asia beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Writing at first in Persian and soon after in South Asian regional vernaculars, authors of genres such as the *marsiyah,* a lengthy poem, transformed the landscape of Karbala from the Iraqi desert into something distinctly Indian. Imam Husain and his family became similarly localized.

Immigrants also introduced the foodways of their former homelands, leaving an indelible imprint on the Indian culinary landscape. The delicate kababs, *pulaos,* and *khoresh* stews of Iran and Central Asia brought by Iranian immigrants were enhanced by Indian cooks with a rich array of spices, souring agents, and nuts to reflect Ayurvedic and Unani systems of medicine and South Asian culinary sensibilities. South Asian Shiʿism is deeply connected with food and traditions of hospitality, which also weave their way throughout the chapters of this book. The Nawabs of Awadh, whose capital in the North Indian city of Lucknow was an important center of Shiʿi culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were renowned for the delicateness (*nazakat*) of their cuisine. Awadhi cuisine was famous for its theatrical "riddle" dishes, in which "one food seemed or tasted like another," or else featured a "spectacle like an opium-dozed monkey hiding within a fried bread, or *puri*" (Shaffer 2012, 89).

During Muharram, food takes a prominent role at the end of the mourning assemblies, known in Urdu as *majlis-e ʿaza*, when special blessed foods called *tabarruk* are passed out to those in attendance. *Tabarruk* may be as simple as a piece of bread or as elaborate and costly as a special spiced rice dish like a *pulao*

or *biryani*, studded with vegetables instead of meat in fulfillment of vows made during the days of Muharram. Streets are also lined with special stands known as *sabil* where beverages such as water, milk, and *sharbat*, cooling drinks made from flower petals, fruits, or seeds, are served to mourners (ʿ*azadaran*). Setting up *sabil* stalls and serving drinks to mourners during Muharram is not only a popular act of piety for Shiʿa; it is also common to see Hindus and Sunnis participating to show their solidarity with Imam Husain, his family, and to those who mourn during the ten days of Muharram.

For Shiʿa living in the subcontinent, there has been a remarkable degree of continuity in the preservation of identity. Until the relatively recent rise of rapid intercontinental travel by airplane, bus, and train, the geographical and cultural distance of the subcontinent from the major centers of Shiʿi pilgrimage in Qom and Mashhad, Iran; Karbala, Najaf, and Kazmain, Iraq; and Damascus, Syria has encouraged greater integration of Shiʿa in blending their practices – religious, culinary, lifecycle, architectural, material cultural – with local culture. In Chapter 6 I will examine the constellation of pilgrimage (*ziyarah*) practices that have transformed India into an enchanted Shiʿi landscape, while simultaneously connecting the Shiʿa to the sacred sites of shared historical memory in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and the Arabian peninsula. In Arabic, *ziyarah* means “visitation,” which in the Shiʿi context has been expanded to refer to the practice of visiting shrine-tombs and offering recitations to the sacred figures entombed within. *Ziyarah* is often translated to the word “pilgrimage” as a sort of shorthand for the activities that are performed by these “visitors” to the places of martyrdom (*mashhad*) of the Imams and members of the Ahl-e Bait, or to the shrine-tombs of other Shiʿi saints.

I arrived in Hyderabad in January 2005, just weeks before the start of the month of Muharram, when Shiʿa throughout the Islamic world remember the events leading up to the martyrdom of the third Imam Husain and his troop of 72 men and boys, and the humiliation and suffering of the women and children in his family. I remembered those declarations of my Iranian interlocutors about Indian Muharram ritual. Participating in mourning assemblies, I found such statements,

while superficially complimentary, reductive and troubling upon deeper consideration. I was troubled by the ways in which such ostensibly positive statements ultimately placed South Asia at the margins of the Shiʿi world, somehow divorced from broader historical, theological, and political currents. Instead, Shiʿa living in the region that comprises the Indian subcontinent inhabit multiple worlds. Their religious sensibilities are shaped by Islamic laws and norms, the cultural memory of the events of Karbala, and a South Asian or Indic grammar of religion that animates devotional practices and traditions to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, which I refer to as "Indo-Shiʿism."

If South Asia is situated at some geographical, ideological, and *normative* periphery of the broader Islamic, and specifically Shiʿi world, then how might we refocus our analytical and theoretical gaze to learn what it means to be Shiʿa in this context? In *Everyday Shiʿism*, I enact a series of shifts in our analytical gaze. The first such analytical shift takes us from center (the central Arab lands, the Shiʿi heartland of Iran and Iraq) to periphery (the Indian subcontinent). Centers, be they economic, religious, political, educational, or ideological, are sites of power, which radiate in their myriad forms outward to the peripheries. What happens when we turn our attention to Shiʿi religious practice in the Indian subcontinent, perceived to be at the periphery of the broader Shiʿi-Islamic world? The work of scholar Simon Fuchs, who has studied the ways Pakistani Shiʿi religious scholars (ʿ*ulama*) "employ the Islamic scholarly tradition in their arguments, how they tie their claims to centers of scholarship, and how they vow faithfully to uphold such central authority only to subtly rework arguments emanating from there," is helpful in understanding the creative ways normative claims issued from the center are reworked in the putative periphery (2019, 4). For Fuchs, center and periphery are only understandable when placed in context, which he defines as "transnational *impetus* and domestic *response*" (2019, 4). Here, Pakistani Shiʿa are not passive recipients of knowledge and ideology flowing from the religious seminaries (*howzah*) of Najaf and Qom. Religious knowledge is mediated through translation from Arabic and Persian into Urdu and other vernaculars, the political-theology of the revolution is often toned

down or transformed to speak to local Pakistani concerns – periphery becomes center.

The Hyper-visible "Invisible" Community

Everyday Shiʿism focuses on the daily, lived experiences of South Asian Shiʿa told through translations of primary source materials, including photographs, material objects, architecture, food, and ethnographic vignettes. I pay exclusive attention to South Asian Shiʿism in this book because it has largely been ignored in previous introductory texts (more on this later in the chapter), despite a long history of ʿAlid devotion in the region. More telling is the 2009 Pew Foundation Report, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population," which demonstrates a remarkable sensitivity in accounting for and highlighting the distribution of the world's Shiʿa. The Pew Foundation report does note that their population figures are estimates only, as few censuses include questions about one's religious identity. When they do, the answers provided do not account for sectarian affiliations; instead they reflect only generic classifications such as Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, depending on the survey and context. Moreover, as we have already noted, in places where religious minorities experience discrimination and persecution, Shiʿa have put into practice the theological doctrine of precautionary concealment (*taqiyyah*) in order to blend in with the larger Muslim community, further complicating attempts to distinguish and enumerate religiously diverse populations. For this reason, we often have to estimate Shiʿi populations of cities and regions in South Asia.

According to the Pew Foundation report, 75% of the global Shiʿi population lives in the Asia-Pacific region, which includes the Shiʿi majority country of Iran (2009, 8). Pakistan's Shiʿi population is approximately 17–26 million (total country population: 174 082 000) and India's is 16–24 million (total Muslim population: 160 945 000; total population of India in 2018: 1.32 billion). Although the populations for each of these two countries are statistically small, the combined population of Shiʿa in Pakistan and India is between 33 and 50 million, equaling the number of Shiʿa in *all* of the countries of the Middle East

and North Africa region combined, totaling between 36 and 44 million (2009, 13). Iran's total population in 2020 was 83.7 million, of which 89% are Shiʿa ("Iran Population" 2020). The vast majority – almost 90% – of Iranians are Shiʿa (comprising 74.5 million people), with 10% identifying as Sunni and 1% variously as Zoroastrian, Christian, Baha'i, or Jewish. While countries such as Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain also have Shiʿi majorities, scholars have privileged Iranian Shiʿism.

Muharram is a hyper-visible ritual in South Asia with its large-scale processions of ʿ*alams* and *taʿziyas*, and men's performance of bloody self-flagellation (*khuni matam*) on ʿ*ashura*. India and Pakistan's minority communities cannot help but be seen during Muharram (see Chapter 5), yet the *longue durée* of their historical presence in the subcontinent (Cole 1989; Hollister [1953] 1979; Rizvi 1986; Shurreef 1991), and the religious influence of Shiʿism on literature (Bard 2002; Hyder 2005; Kugle 2016), architecture (Allan 2012; Naqvi 2006), politics (Eaton and Wagoner 2014; Fischel 2012; Sherwani 1974), and the arts (Haidar and Sardar 2011, 2015; Wagoner and Weinstein 2017) remains an emergent field of exploration. Refocusing our analytical gaze enables us to be attentive to the long, complex history of Shiʿism in the subcontinent, while also problematizing the idea of center and periphery, particularly when we take into consideration the combined Shiʿi population of India and Pakistan.

Redefining Norms: Shiʿi/South Asia/Everyday

Al-Muntazar,[3] the journal put out by the Association of Imam Mahdi, based in Mumbai, India, published an article in its 1994 Muharram issue on the permissibility of making replicas (*taʿziya*) of Imam Husain's shrine-tomb in Karbala (al-Muntazar 1994). In the article's introductory paragraph, the author describes the situation thus, "The Shias of India and Pakistan, place effigies of the shrines of their Imams (a.s.) and more particularly of Imam Husain (a.s.) in their homes and Imambaras. This custom has come under critical attack by some Sunni scholars and also some so-called enlightened Shias, who question the religious legality of this practice and look at it through skeptical eyes. In this

article, we shall produce those references and extracts which shall silent [sic] them and prove their skepticism like a design on the water" (al-Muntazar 1994). The installation of objects of cultural memory, such as *taʿziya*, in homes and religious buildings, the criticism of this practice, and the response by the author of the article in *al-Muntazar* reveals the discursive processes by which Shiʿi normative categories are created and contested.

In describing the formation of the institution of the position of the most learned of Shiʿi religious scholars, the *marjaʿ al-taqlid* in the nineteenth century, Sabrina Mervin explains,

> Religious authority depends on doctrines, norms and concepts of *fiqh* that have their own histories and fields of application … Defining these doctrines, as much for those within the faith as outside it, allowed the *ʿulama* to set limits around the community for which they acted as spokesmen. At the heart of the system lay the religious rules and norms and the usages that ruled the lives of the faithful. These rules also determined their relationship to the religious authority along with the access of the experts, the *ʿulama*, to that authority. Some of these usages became norms in due course.
>
> Source: Sabrina Mervin, "Writing the History of Religious Authority in Najaf: The *Marjaʿiyya* as Apparatus," in *Najaf: Portrait of a Holy City*, ed. Sabrina Mervin, Robert Gleave, and Géraldine Chatelard (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2017), 171, 173.

For Mervin, Shiʿi normativity is directly connected to the office of the *marjaʿ*, rooted in the jurisprudential tradition, and mediated by religious scholars. This is a normativity situated directly within a legal-textual tradition whose authority to set limits resides with an educated, clerical class.

In his recent study of theological debates and competing visions of the Prophet Muhammad in nineteenth-century India that shaped the Sunni discourses of Deobandi and Barelvi thinkers, Sherali Tareen's theorization of Islamic normativity balances religious authority with the everyday. Tareen observes,

“Central to theorizing the category of normativity in Islam is the question of how a set of authoritative religious discourses become embodied in a community’s practice of everyday life” (2020, 185). Tareen engages the French sociologist-anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of *habitus* and *doxa* to show how the presence of past experiences (such as the use of reminding objects and the associated rituals that sediment cultural memory) are “deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms” (Bourdieu 1990, 54; quoted in Tareen 2020, 184). The constancy established by the sedimentation of past perceptions or memories in the present as *habitus* assume bodily form in Bourdieu’s concept of *doxa*, which are “a collection of bodily rhythms and dispositions that come to be taken for granted by members of a community as an established cosmological order, perceived not as arbitrary (i.e. as one among others) but as a self-evident natural order recurrently reproduced without any questioning or second-guessing” (Tareen 2020, 185).

Norms shape the worlds of South Asian everyday Shiʿism. Normativity and the everyday are not antagonistic categories. In their essay, “Rediscovering the ‘Everyday’ Muslim: Notes on an Anthropological Divide,” Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando rightly critique the recent turn in the anthropology of Islam that has placed the everyday and normativity at odds in Muslim life. According to Fadil and Fernando, recent scholarship by scholars such as Samuli Schielke (2012, 2009), Magnus Marsden (2010, 2005), and Liza Debevec (2012) have imagined the Islamic everyday “as a site of creativity, individuality, and transgression, a space in which Muslims negotiate and, importantly, contest the normative requirements to which they are subjected by enacting a set of alternative desires. Everyday practices thereby appear as moments of disruption, of not conforming to religious norms. But this invocation of the everyday as only a site of contingency or resistance can lead to an oppositional distinction between domains that are saturated by power and social conventions (Islamic doctrine and morality) and those that are not (everyday practices)” (Fadil and

Fernando 2015, 69). The everyday Shiʿism that I describe in this book is certainly defined by its creativity, and the norms that establish its boundaries while allowing for contestation and a multiplicity of voices.

The presumption of an agonistic relationship between norms and the everyday begs us to ask the question, why should everyday life not be considered an equally constitutive element in the formation of Islamic-Shiʿi norms as are scriptural hermeneutics and debates? We might instead ask how the everyday and the normative might be symbiotically related, which we aim to do both conceptually and strategically by linking together the categories, "Shiʿi/South Asia/everyday," which are often imagined as peripheral to the dominant Islamic studies categories, "Sunni/Arab/scriptural." South Asian everyday Shiʿism finds its basis in the normative model of the Imams and the family of the Prophet Muhammad. The different genres of literature about the Karbala events, poems praising the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, prayers, miracle stories, as well as material objects such as ʿ*alams* and *taʿziyas* that are the subject of this book, all find their spiritual inspiration and derive their doctrinal legitimation from deep traditions of textual authority. These include records of the words and actions of the Imams (*akhbar*) and the Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*), hagiographies, and theological and legal treatises.

The everyday is symbiotically intertwined with normative sources that shape the tradition. As such, the everyday is shaped by elite and grassroots actors, not all of whom are explicitly Shiʿa or even necessarily religious, yet they are influenced by the theme of Karbala and the moral and ethical message of Imam Husain's sacrifice (see Chapter 2). Some aspects of the everyday are the product of specialist knowledge, such as the epic *marsiyah* poems, which can span hundreds of stanzas, and often spin across its lines complex linguistic imagery and metaphors. The literary skill required of the author displays vast knowledge of Sufism, Shiʿi *hadith*, the Qurʾan, and the considerable body of hagiographical texts about the Imams, Ahl-e Bait, and Karbala that have proliferated since the tenth century. The *majlis* orator is likewise required to be able to master a similar textual corpus that she can recall instantly in order to extemporize based on the

reaction of the participants in a mourning assembly to the particular theme or use of sources.

Shiʿi cultural memory is shaped by these specialists but they do not hold exclusive claim. While the construction of a permanent *taʿziya* requires lengthy training and specialized knowledge in how to carve the intricate designs decorating a tomb replica and to assemble it into a fantastical multi-story structure, families and members of neighborhood associations collaborate to create ephemeral models with bamboo frames covered with tinsel, flowers, and colored paper. Although Shahab Ahmed's proposed Balkans-to-Bengal complex focuses on the pre-modern period, 1350–1850, some of the observations he makes with regard to the experimental and expressive modes of being Islamic loosely apply to our Shiʿi/South Asia/everyday configuration: "the Muslims of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex did not feel the need to articulate or legitimate their Muslim-ness/their Islam by mimesis of a pristine time of the earliest generations of the community (the *salaf*). Rather, they felt able to be Muslim in explorative, creative, and contrary trajectories" (Ahmed 2016, 81). While Karbala, the Imams, and the Ahl-e Bait shape much of everyday Shiʿi religious life, the impetus is different for South Asian Shiʿa who do not attempt to recreate a lost past, but rather find in the model of these exemplary individuals consolation, hope, and a focus for their intense love. Rather, it is the spirit of creative exploration that animates the cultural memory of Karbala, the Imams, and Ahl-e Bait that shapes everyday South Asian Shiʿism.

To consider the interrelationship between the everyday and normativity, I now return to the introductory paragraph of the article published in the 1994 issue of *al-Muntazar*, which sought to prove the permissibility of erecting *taʿziyas* in one's home and *imambaras*. For this Mumbai-based, Shiʿi religious association, their objective was to unequivocally establish the legality of creating *taʿziyas* of Imam Husain's shrine-tomb using "references and extracts" of authoritative religious texts in order to silence "some Sunni scholars and also some so-called enlightened Shias" and "prove their skepticism like a design on water" (al-Muntazar 1994). In this case, the Association of Imam Mahdi, which received its

permission (*ijazat*) to issue legal opinions (*fatwa*) from the Najaf-based *marjaʿ* Grand Ayatollah ʿAli al-Sistani, used its normative authority to identify and delimit two groups of Muslims as internal "others" – some Sunnis and some "so-called enlightened Shiʿas" – for their rejection of erecting *taʿziyas*. They use authoritative Shiʿi texts, including Muhammad Baqir Majlisi's seventeenth-century monumental *hadith* compilation, *Bihar al-anwar* (Oceans of lights) and *Zad al-maʿad* (Provisions for the heavenly journey), and the eleventh-century Iraq-based scholar al-Shaikh al-Tusi's legal compendium *al-Mabsut fi fiqh al-imamiyya* (An exposition on Shiʿi jurisprudence). Recourse to these authoritative sources is intended to silence these critics by proving the veracity of erecting tomb replicas as based on the practice of the Imams. The author of the article further situates his argument in the nexus of normativity and the Shiʿi/South Asia/everyday in the first concluding point: "There is no harm in making effigies of the shrines of the Imams (a.s.), if intended to recite Ziyarat from distance, rather great traditionalists have found it to be an authentic practice" (al-Muntazar 1994).

The everyday is integral to the normative, just as the textual is integral to the ritual performances that shape everyday Shiʿism. I hope that the reconceptualization of Shiʿism that I propose in this book will enable us to return our gaze to other parts of the Shiʿi world with the ability to see it "in a new light and with the benefit of a new perspective which will enable us to *see things that we have been unable to see before*" (Ahmed 2016, 82).

Representing Shiʿism

This book considers the ways in which Shiʿism adapted to the cultural, religious, political, and aesthetic diversity of the subcontinent. In writing this book I have made several choices with regard to representation and scope. I focus here on the Ithna ʿAshariyyah, more commonly known as the "Twelver" Shiʿa for their recognition and acceptance of the spiritual and political leadership of the twelve Imams who succeeded the Prophet Muhammad after his death in 632.

In addition to the Twelver Shiʿas, diverse Shiʿi groups have made the subcontinent their home. There are thriving communities of Ismaʿili Muslims in Gujarat, India and Karachi, Pakistan. The early Shiʿi community divided over the question of succession following the death of the sixth Imam, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq (d. 765). The majority recognized the Imamate of Musa al-Kazim as the seventh Imam and his successors through the twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, who is in a state of occultation known as *al-ghaybah al-kubra*. These followers of Imam Musa al-Kazim and his descendants are the Twelver Shiʿa. A smaller group, who came to be known as the Ismaʿilis, recognized his elder son Ismaʿil, whom they believe Jaʿfar al-Sadiq designated (*nass*) to be his successor. Ismaʿil died before his father, and many of his supporters believed he was in Occultation. Two branches of Ismaʿilism are found in South Asia today, the Nizaris, who follow the 49th Imam, Aga Khan IV, Prince Shah Karim al-Husayni (Khan 2004; Marsden 2005; Nanji 1978; Purohit 2012; Steinberg 2011). The Daʾudi Bohras are a sub-branch of the Tayyabi Mustʿali Ismaʿilis who follow the 53rd Syedna Dr. Aliqadr Mufaddal Saifuddin (Blank 2001; Qutbuddin 2011). The Daʾudi Bohras settled in Gujarat from Yemen in the sixteenth century; their name, Bohra, comes from the Gujarati *vehru,* referring to their hereditary profession as traders. Although many Daʾudi Bohras are centered in Gujarat, the office of the Syedna is based in Mumbai, and other concentrations of the community can be found in Pakistan, Yemen, and East Africa where traders have moved across the Indian Ocean. As in the broader Muslim world, the diversity of Shiʿa living in the subcontinent is shaped not only by the variation in linguistic, ethnic, caste and other markers of identity already mentioned, but also by doctrinal differences.

This book is an introduction to Twelver Shiʿism as a lived practice in South Asia. By focusing on a geographically defined space, this book is able to ask a specific question: How have Shiʿa adapted to and been shaped by South Asia? Chapters 2–6 explore different aspects of this cultural imprint by focusing on Shiʿism in local contexts through case studies of literary aesthetics, architecture and the formation of sacred spaces and landscapes, religious material culture, Muharram ritual, festivals, pilgrimage and vow-making. I do not include comparative

examples from other parts of the Shiʿi world such as Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, or Syria because these contexts are sometimes so significantly different at the level of "on-the-ground" practice that only superficial or structural similarities in a ritual practice or the content of a poem may be apparent. Looking beyond South Asia to the *ʿatabat-e ʿaliyat* ("the lofty thresholds," referring to the sacred Shiʿi shrine cities of Iran, Iraq, and Syria) also causes us to lose sight of important issues such as the influence of the Muharram processions of devotional objects, for example the *ʿalam* (metal crest) and *taʿziya* (shrine-tomb replica of Imam Husain), as a prototype for Hindu festivals in the nineteenth century involving the public procession of deities (*murti*), particularly Ganesh Chaturthi in Pune, Maharashtra, and Bonalu in Telangana (Ruffle 2017, 343).

Western scholars have studied the family of the Prophet Muhammad, the Imams, theology, law, and the history of Shiʿism with varying degrees of objectivity since the nineteenth century. Many studies of contemporary Shiʿism consider the 1978–1979 Iranian revolution as a watershed moment through which the religion must be considered (Afary and Anderson 2005; Fischer 1981; Halm 1997). For Americans, the subsequent "hostage crisis" in which 52 diplomats and civilians were held in Tehran for 444 days from 4 November 1979 until 20 January 1981 precipitated a sense of urgency to learn more about Shiʿism and the new Islamic Republic of Iran (*jomhuri-ye islami-ye Iran*) led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the country's Supreme Leader. Certainly, the Iranian revolution was a critically important moment for the study of Shiʿism and its representation both from within and outside the tradition, however, scholars and travelers have been writing about Shiʿism in South Asia since the seventeenth century.

In the seventeenth century, a genre of European travel writing emerged simultaneously with the rise of dynasties such as the Shiʿi Safavids in Iran (r. 1501–1724), the Qutb Shahs in Hyderabad, Deccan (r. 1496–1687), and the Sunni Mughals in North India (r. 1526–1857). The European authors of these travelogues were diplomats, missionaries, merchants, and sometimes scholars, whose descriptions of Shiʿi ritual and practice were often impressionistic; their tone often conveys a distaste for the fervor expressed by devotees during

Muharram. Due to its highly visible rituals and profusion of devotional material objects, foreigners residing in India seemed to write more about Muharram than most other Indic religious rituals, a point I discuss in Chapter 5.

Born into a wealthy French family in 1633, Jean de Thévenot spent many of his 34 years (d. 1667) traveling through Europe before following his wanderlust in Iran, and later in the place that most deeply fascinated him, India. Thévenot's travels were collected into three volumes, the third part, titled *The Relation of Indostan, the New Moguls, and of the People and Countries of the Indies,* chronicled his travels beginning in 1665. Thévenot's description of Muharram in Hyderabad-Golconda dates to the reign of the seventh sultan, ʿAbdullah (r. 1626–1672) under whose patronage rituals commemorating the battle of Karbala flourished. Thévenot's description of Muharram in Hyderabad-Golconda is sensational and exoticizes its ritual participants, however we can still carefully read his account to glean considerable valuable information:

I had as much time as I needed to see the Celebration of the Festival of *Hussein*, the Son of *Aly*, which fell out at that time. The *Moors* of *Golconda* celebrated it with more Fopperies than they do in *Persia*; there is nothing but Masquarades for the space of ten days; they erect Chappels in all the Streets with Tents, which they fill with Lamps, and adorn with Foot-Carpets; the Streets are full of People, and all of them almost have their Faces covered with Sifted ashes; they who are naked cover their whole Body with them, and they who are cloathed their Apparel; but the cloaths they wear on these days are generally extravagant … several drag about the Streets long Chains as big as ones Arm, which are tied to their Girdle; and it being painful to drag them, they thereby move the pity of Zelots who touch them, and having kissed their Fingers, lift them up to their Eyes, as if these Chains were holy Relicks. They make Processions, wherein many carry Banners, and others have Poles, on which there is a Silver-Plate that represents *Husseins* hand; some with little Houses of a light wood upon their heads, skip, and turn at certain cadences of a Song; others dance in a round, holding the point of their naked Swords upwards, which they clash one against another, crying with all their force *Hussein*.

Source: Jean de Thévenot, *Indian Travels, 1666–1667*, ed. Surendranath Sen (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2011), 148–149.

What can we learn about seventeenth-century Muharram in India from Thévenot's description? Rather a lot, once we read beyond his use of derogatory terms such as "fopperies" or "zealot," and his astonishment at seeing ash-smeared bodies dragging around chains. In seventeenth-century Hyderabad, Shiʿa carried metal crests known as ʿ*alam*s (some bearing the *panjah* or outstretched palm) and small tomb replicas (*taʿziya*, see Chapter 4) in Muharram processions. They also participated during Muharram in a votive ritual called *langar*, in which massive chains were worn on the body and dragged about. The *langar* was a new ritual, innovated by ʿAbdullah's mother, Hayat Bakshi Begum, as a sign of gratitude to the Imam for the safe return of her son after the elephant he was

riding went berserk. Thévenot's statement at the beginning of his account that Muharram in India differs from Iranian ritual is borne out by his evocative description.

In the nineteenth century, two individuals wrote extended accounts of Shiʿi life in Lucknow and the Deccan region that continue to provide valuable information for scholars today. The first, Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAli, was an Englishwoman[4] who married into a Shiʿi family and lived in her father-in-law's house for 12 years (1816–1828) in the north Indian city Lucknow, which was then a center of courtly Shiʿi culture under the Nawabs of Awadh (r. 1722–1858). During her 12 years abroad, Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAli wrote a series of letters back to her family and friends in London describing daily life in Lucknow, which was largely shaped by the rhythms and routines of the Shiʿi calendar. These letters were later collected and published in 1832 as *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India: Descriptive of Their Manners, Customs, Habits and Religious Opinions, Made during a Twelve Years' Residence in Their Immediate Society*. The letters are topical, focusing on fasting practices, Muharram, religious architecture, lifecycle rituals (birth, marriage, death), women's piety and role in the household, food preparations and offerings, and vow-making.

Completed in the same year as *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India*, Jaffur Shurreef's ethnographic study of the local customs of the Muslims of the Deccan region of south-central India was published. *Qanoon-e Islam, Or the Customs of the Mussulmans of India, Comprising a Full and Exact Account of Their Various Rites and Ceremonies from the Moment of Birth till the Hour of Death* is a compendium of Shiʿi and Sufi practices, and its attention to Shiʿi ritual is particularly rich. In addition to the in-depth description Shurreef provides of Muharram, he also devotes attention to performing vows (*nazr o niyaz*), the daily prayer (*namaz*), the construction of amulets (*taʿviz*), care of the body, and lifecycle events, including divorce.

Scholarship from the twentieth century to the present on South Asian Shiʿism has taken a more focused approach. The narrower focus of these works reflects the modern academy, which requires scholars to engage their subjects of study from

within clear disciplinary fields such as anthropology, religious studies, history, art history, or literature. In the following brief survey, I draw your attention to several books that approach aspects of South Asian Shiʿism from many of the fields previously mentioned.[5] John Norman Hollister's 1953 *The Shiʿa of India* is a comprehensive survey of the history of Shiʿism in India. Hollister's work is inclusive of minority Shiʿi groups such as the Ismaʿilis and the Bohras. Another valuable historical survey is Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi's two-volume *Socio-Intellectual History of the Isna-ʿAshari Shiʿis in India* (1986).

In the 1990s and continuing to the present, religious studies scholars have published a number of important books on Shiʿi ritual in India and Pakistan. In 1992, David Pinault's *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* was published, along with Vernon J. Schubel's 1993 *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shiʿi Devotional Rituals in South Asia*. Both were ground-breaking studies of how Muharram is observed and performed at the everyday level in Hyderabad, India and Karachi, Pakistan. Pinault's study of Hyderabadi Muharram rituals brought readers into the middle of young men's Muharram "guilds" (*guruh* or *anjuman*) where months are spent perfecting new styles of self-flagellation (*matam*), performed during the recitation of short rhythmic poems called *nauhah* that recall moments from the battle of Karbala. Schubel's attention to gender is significant, and he brings us translations of miracle stories (*muʿjizat kahanis*) – often centering on Fatimah al-Zahra – that are told by women during gatherings and as a part of daily life (discussed in Chapters 2 and 6). Pinault followed up *The Shiites* in 2001 with *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India*, returning the reader to Hyderabad. More interestingly, in the same study he introduces Muharram rituals in Darjeeling, a hill station in West Bengal, devotional practices to Imam Husain's horse Zuljanah in the Himalayan region of Ladakh, a former Buddhist kingdom in Jammu and Kashmir along the border with Tibet and Pakistan, and *yawm-e asad* (the Day of the Lion), also known as the "second [*dusra*] Muharram." This latter holiday is held in the summer to compensate for when Muharram falls during Ladakh's frigid winters as a result of the shifting Islamic lunar calendar

(Pinault 2001, 181–208). Toby Howarth's *Twelver Shiʿa as a Muslim Minority in India: The Pulpit of Tears* (2005) focuses on the speeches delivered by narrators (m. *zakir*, f. *zakirah*) of the events of the battle of Karbala in the mourning assembly (*majlis-e ʿaza*). Also focusing on Hyderabad's Shiʿi community, Howarth analyzes ten narrations delivered by both male and female orators in mourning assemblies between 1997 and 2000.

Integrating religious studies methods and feminist theory, my own 2011 *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shiʿism* and Diane D'Souza's 2014 *Partners of Zaynab: A Gendered Perspective of Shia Muslim Faith* are ethnographically informed projects engaging the Shiʿi community in Hyderabad's Old City. In *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice* I take a single event from the Karbala cycle as paradigmatic to explain the relationship between hagiographical texts (stories of saints' lives) and religious performance in the production of culturally meaningful idealized gender roles that are mediated by the legitimating model of such figures as the bride-widow Fatimah Kubra and her bridegroom-warrior Qasem. I take the model of Fatimah Kubra's battlefield wedding and nearly simultaneous widowhood as a case study in my book to examine the ways in which processes of vernacularization transform her into an idealized Hyderabadi Shiʿi saint whose modelling of idealized wifehood and widowhood reflects the cultural values of the contemporary Deccan rather than the seventh-century Arab world. D'Souza's study, based on her many years of living in Hyderabad, focuses on Shiʿi women's piety and ritual practice. Notably, her fieldwork focuses on Yadgar-e Husaini, a women-administrated *ʿashurkhanah* (buildings where mourning assemblies are held and *ʿalam*s are displayed), and it is here that she weaves together women's everyday religious practices through storytelling, collective rituals, devotion to the *ʿalam*, the performance of votive rituals such as *ʿamal* (the repetition of a verse or prayer) and *dastarkhwan*, a special women-only meal held in fulfilment of a vow.

Beyond religious studies, scholars in history and literature have also made important contributions to the study of South Asian Shiʿism in recent decades. Syed Akbar Hyder's *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory*

(2006) begins in the author's home city of Hyderabad, India. However, the literary diversity engaged in this book is spectacular. Karbala has touched the imagination of writers of nearly all genres of Perso-Indian literature, from the "oral Shii, Sufi, and Marxist discourses of the twentieth century, as well as South Asian nationalist and antinationalist theatrical and fictional imaginaries" (Hyder 2006, 7). Hyder analyzes the Karbala-inflected writings and performances of Indian and Pakistani auteurs and intellectuals, amongst them Mir Anis, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Mohandas K. Gandhi, and Ismat Chughtai, as well as interviewing "laypeople whose authority vis-à-vis Karbala rests solely on devotional and perceptive experience" (2006, 7). Hyder's study compellingly reveals how thoroughly Karbala imagery and its ethos has pervaded South Asian culture and aesthetics. Amy Bard's 2002 doctoral dissertation, "Desolate Victory: Shiʿi Women and the *Marsiyah* Texts of Lucknow," is a richly textured study of literary production and performance of the *marsiyah* in Lucknow, although her study is informed by fine-grained fieldwork conducted with Shiʿi women in Hyderabad, Deccan and in Karachi and Lahore, Pakistan.

Historical studies of Shiʿism in the British colonial period and post-Partition India and Pakistan have proliferated since 2000. In 2012, the historian Justin Jones's *Shiʿa Islam in Colonial India: Religion, Community and Sectarianism* was published. In his study, Jones focuses on the conscious formation and articulation of sectarian identity in North India following the 1857 uprising against the British. Jones pays close attention to the role of ritual in creating a "marketplace" in which Shiʿa had greater opportunities to experiment with and express their identity through the public performance of Muharram, which also brought about increased sectarian division between North Indian Sunnis and Shiʿa (2012, 73–113). This study was followed up with *The Shiʿa in Modern South Asia: Religion, History and Politics*, co-edited by Justin Jones and Ali Usman Qasmi (2015). Chapters in this volume focus on the influential twentieth-century theologians Sayyid Dildar ʿAli Nasirabadi and ʿAli Naqi Naqvi, and we learn about ʿArif Husain al-Husaini's deployment of the Karbala Paradigm in his 1980s activism to rally Pakistani Shiʿa following the Iranian revolution. Other

chapters explore transnational Shiʿi networks such as the Aga Khan Development Network's social and development projects. Andreas Rieck's 2016 *The Shias of Pakistan: An Assertive and Beleaguered Minority* chronologically traces the emergence of a South Asian Shiʿi communal identity in North India from the second half of the nineteenth century through the establishment of Pakistan with Partition in 1947. The remainder of the book traces the fate of the Pakistani Shiʿi community through the rule of the country's different leaders from Muhammad ʿAli Jinnah until Asif ʿAli Zardari in 2013. Rieck takes a dual focus in each chapter, mapping out the various Shiʿi movements and their demands during each period, as well as the violence, persecution, and other sectarian challenges they encountered from Sunni groups. The book situates Pakistani Shiʿism more as a political phenomenon than a lived religious tradition. Simon Wolfgang Fuchs's 2019 monograph, *In a Pure Muslim Land: Shiʿism between Pakistan and the Middle East*, challenges conventional assessments of Pakistani Shiʿism as marginal, arguing that the country's popular religious scholars and preachers are vital and active participants in transnational Shiʿism. Fuchs more deeply braids together Shiʿism's religious and political dimensions, arguing that the political theology of the Iranian revolution was thoroughly localized by Pakistani Shiʿa. Despite the rise in sectarian violence in Pakistan since the 1980s, Fuchs's study resists portraying the Shiʿa as a weak or "beleaguered" community.

In the domain of everyday Shiʿism, I intentionally exclude two issues that have received disproportionate attention from scholars in the broader field of Shiʿi studies, namely the religious authority of the office of the *marjaʿiyyah* and the religious seminary (*howzah*), and the intersection of Shiʿism and sectarian politics. As the pinnacle of Shiʿi clerical authority, the *marjaʿ al-taqlid* ("the source of emulation"), is who we might understand to be a "Grand Ayatollah" whose religious learning is recognized by a large number of Shiʿa, and whose legal opinions are taken as authoritative. By some reckonings, there are currently approximately 66 *marajiʿ* (sing. *marjaʿ al-taqlid*) whose authority is accepted; the majority are Iranian or Iraqi, although several were born in British India (pre-1947), Afghanistan, and Bahrain. Babak Rahimi posits a new model of Shiʿi

authority that he refers to as “democratic Usulism” advocated by two *maraji*ʿ, Montazeri and Sistani, which decenters theocratic and political authoritarianism in favor of a religiously inflected democracy (2012, 193). Shiʿa are free to choose the *marja*ʿ whose authority they want to follow in understanding matters of religious law and etiquette. The ubiquity of the Internet and social media has made it ever easier for Shiʿa to connect with their chosen *marja*ʿ *al-taqlid*. No longer is one required to consult the *marja*ʿ*’s* compendium of legal opinions, the *Risalah* or his representative to obtain an answer; Shiʿa can now go to his website, perform keyword or topical searches, or directly submit his or her question. Every Shiʿa follows a *marja*ʿ, however for many, everyday life does not revolve around this institutional authority. Everyday Shiʿism is more deeply animated by rituals that perpetuate the memory of the battle of Karbala and make present the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. It is for this reason that I also do not engage with political issues of sectarianism, minority politics, or violence, which have been the subject of many of the monographs I summarize above, as well as countless articles.

The aim of *Everyday Shiʿism* is to think about the ways that the Shiʿa are members of and have contributed to South Asian religious history and culture, as well as to an Islamic humanistic tradition. I do not aim for comprehensiveness in the topics I present, instead the topics presented in this book address a double-erasure that has characterized “introduction to Shiʿism” textbooks that have been published since the 1980s (Haider 2014; Halm 1997; Momen 1985, 2016; Richard 1995). These texts have tended to emphasize the intellectual traditions of law, philosophy, and theology, or to take the Iranian revolution as the singular, paradigmatic event defining the tradition. The focus has been on Iran, particularly since the 1979 revolution, and the Arab world, where the civil war in Lebanon and Saddam Hussein’s control of the shrine cities of Karbala and Najaf, as well as his persecution of the Shiʿi majority, shifted attention away from South Asia. Aside from Halm’s 1997 *Shiʿa Islam: From Religion to Revolution*, these texts have largely ignored Muharram ritual, material practice, or other aspects of everyday. In *Shiʿa Islam*, Halm devotes a chapter to self-flagellation rituals

(*matam*) and the Iranian *taʿziyeh*, the dramatic re-enactment of Imam Husain's martyrdom during Muharram.

Everyday Shiʿism seeks to redress this imbalance by shifting attention to the long history of Shiʿism and traditions of ʿAlid devotion of Sunni communities, including Sufis, as well as Hindus in South Asia. Serious consideration is also given to the miraculous, the material, the meaning of built religious space, different genres of devotional literature, and the diverse forms of Muharram rituals that keep memory of Karbala in the present.

Contributions

Everyday Shiʿism is the first textbook to focus on the history of lived Shiʿism in South Asia. This is not a history that focuses singularly on the present, but one in which I engage a strategy of emplacement. I move back and forth between the historical present and moments from the past, offering snapshots that allow us a closer look at how individual Shiʿi communities integrated cultural memory of Karbala and love for the Imams and Ahl-e Bait with local material culture, literary, votive, and architectural religious practices to create new expressions of "Indo-Shiʿism," blending aspects of Indic and Shiʿi-Islamic religious sensibilities. *Everyday Shiʿism* does not offer a chronological history of how Shiʿism developed in South Asia, which is far beyond the scope of this work (see Hollister [1953] 1979 and Rizvi 1986), nor do I offer a comprehensive accounting of how Shiʿism is practiced throughout the subcontinent. The snapshot and microscopic case study approaches that I employ provide in-depth examples of lived practices in contemporary and historical perspective.

By intervening in current debates in the study of religion and particularly in the anthropology of Islam regarding the meaning of the "everyday" and its role in constituting Muslim religious identities, my intentional rehabilitation of normativity seeks to redress a perceived antagonism between these two modalities of religious being. *Everyday Shiʿism* likewise shifts the reader's conceptual gaze, frequently disorienting and disrupting notions of center and periphery by showing how Karbala is made translocative by South Asian Shiʿa in

ritual and material practices, as well as through transformations of the local sacred landscape. I show the central place and routine nature of material culture and its associated practices in South Asian everyday Shiʿism, and in the process I rethink the notion of Shiʿi identity. Many of the perspectives, questions, and theoretical interventions that I make might be productively reflected onto other Shiʿi practices and communities elsewhere.

The Scope of *Everyday Shiʿism*

You may have observed in perusing the Table of Contents that there is no separate chapter focusing on "women's" practices or lifecycle rituals and wondered, how I could have published a book about everyday Shiʿism that ignored half of all Shiʿa? I made an intentional decision when I wrote this book that I did not want to isolate women within a separate chapter, particularly since women's voices, emotions, and experiences are integral to shaping everyday Shiʿism. Instead, you will find women's voices, ritual practices, and literature woven into each chapter.

Chapter 1, "South Asian 'Lovers' of the Ahl-e Bait: Hindu and Non-Shiʿi Muslim Traditions of Devotion," considers who are the devotees of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait in South Asia. This chapter explores traditions of venerating the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, referred to as ʿAlid devotion, by South Asian non-Shiʿi communities, including Hindus and Sufi-oriented Sunnis. The quasi-mythical origins of the Husaini Brahmins, who assert their loyalty to Husain and whose traditions of participating in Muharram can be traced back to their ancestor Rahab Dutt, who fought on the Imam's behalf at Karbala. In the Telugu-speaking region of the Deccan in South India, *pirla panduga* (festival of the *pirs*) is celebrated by Hindus and Sunnis who raise up ʿ*alams*, known as *pirs*, and are venerated variously as Sufi saints, Husain's nephew Qasem, or other saintly figures or Imams. The shrine of Bibi Pak Daman, a space that is simultaneously claimed as Sufi and Shiʿi, is sought out as a place of healing by Lahore's multi-religious citizens and reveals how the Ahl-e Bait are woven into the spiritual economy of South Asia.

In Chapter 2, "Come, and Cry, Because ʿ*Ashura* Is Today": Shiʿi Literary Aesthetics," the reasons why the Karbala event and its heroes have captured the imagination of South Asian writers across genres and sectarian boundaries is investigated. The multivalence of Karbala as a symbol of truth, justice, resistance to tyranny, human rights, and revolution weave their way through the *nauhah*, which are episodic, short, rhyming poems, as well as through plays, short stories, and novels that emerged in the twentieth century with the Urdu Progressive Writers' Movement of India (*anjuman-e taraqqi pasand-e musaniffin-e Hind*). This chapter focuses on the role of female voices and emotions, revealing the significance of the *nauhah* and miracle stories, known as *muʿjizat kahanis*, in South Asian everyday Shiʿism as literary aesthetic media for teaching religious lessons, reinforcing communitarian and family cohesion, instilling remembrance of Karbala, and making the Imams and Ahl-e Bait present.

Chapter 3, "In the House of the Tenth: Spaces of Shiʿi Devotion," introduces the reader to the diverse forms of South Asian Shiʿi religious architecture. Shiʿi religious space in South Asia is about much more than mosques, although these are fascinating spaces, as I show in my discussion of the hybrid mosque and ʿ*ashurkhanah* maintained by the Anjuman-e Ahl-e Bait in Asif Nagar in Hyderabad. In this chapter, ʿ*ashurkhanahs*, *imambaras*, *karbala* burial grounds, and *dargahs* in Lucknow and Hyderabad are analyzed through in-depth case studies.

Chapter 4, "Metal Hands and Stone Footprints: Shiʿi Material Practice," challenges the popular perception that Islam is an iconoclastic religion. This chapter introduces a repertoire of objects that invoke the memory of and make present the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. Replicas of Imam Husain's tomb (*taʿziya*) at Karbala, metal standards (ʿ*alam*) of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, Husain's horse Zuljanah, and other objects constitute a representational repertoire that evokes these sacred personalities.

Chapter 5, "Every Place Is Karbala, Every Day Is ʿ*Ashura*: South Asian Muharram Rituals," surveys the events connected with Muharram on a day-to-day basis. The structure of the *majlis* mourning assembly is detailed, including

extensive examples of poetry, discourses, and the exhortations that are performed. The ritual performance of self-flagellation, known as *matam*, is performed on 10 Muharram (ʿ*ashura*), when Imam Husain was martyred. I offer a reading of *matam* as the Shiʿi performance of love and loyalty for Imam Husain and his family, an act that is fundamentally socially positive and affirming of family and community ties.

Chapter 6, "Tasting Sorrow before Joy: Vow-Making and Festival Occasions," maps out the personal relationships South Asian Shiʿa develop with the Imams and Ahl-e Bait through different types of intercessory rituals. Vow-making and supplicatory prayers are an important part of the daily, weekly, or for some, the exceptional practice of South Asian women, who petition individual Imams and members of the Ahl-e Bait to intercede and assist with contracting a marriage, the conception of a baby, curing an ill child, ensuring her success in her studies, or perhaps with employment for her husband. Vow-making and supplicatory prayers are performed through such rituals as the ʿ*amal* prayer cycle, the *dastarkhwan* votive meal, and the recitation of "The Woodcutter's Tale" in honor of Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq on 22 Rajab. Pilgrimage (*ziyarah*), both in India and to the major shrine-tombs of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait (ʿ*atabat-e ʿaliyat*) in Iran, Iraq, and Syria, has also changed in recent years, becoming more accessible to South Asian Shiʿa.

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Theoretical Lessons

- In South Asian Shiʿism, the everyday and the authoritative sources that constitute religious normativity (records of the words and actions of the Imams (*akhbar*) and Prophet Muhammad (*hadith*), hagiographies, theological and legal treatises) are symbiotically intertwined.
- This book reconceptualizes notions of center and periphery in the academic study of Islam (including the study of Shiʿism) and the Islamic world, enabling new perspectives on South Asian Shiʿi religious practice, literary aesthetics, the relationship between religious normativity and the everyday, and material culture.

Notes

1 This issue has not been sufficiently studied and would be a productive topic for future research.

2 A ritual of belief is incumbent on all members of the religious community, such as fasting during the month of Ramzan, if one is physically able. Devotional acts tend to be more individualized and inter-relational, for example, a new mother feeling a strong attachment to Imam Husain's martyred infant son ʿAli Asghar, whose throat was pierced with an arrow.

3 In 2006, the journal's name changed from *al-Muntazar* (The awaited one) to *al-Qaem al-Muntazar* (The awaited one who is to rise up), a messianic title for the occulted twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi.

4 According to the historian Ruby Lal, Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAli is now identified as Biddy Tims from Addiscombe, Surrey in England (2010, 50). Tims married Meer Hassan ʿAli in Addiscombe where he served as assistant from 1810–1816 to John Shakespear, professor of Hindustani at the Military College. In 1816 Meer Hassan ʿAli and his wife set sail for Calcutta. Meer Hassan ʿAli remained in Calcutta where he taught Arabic to British officials and Biddy lived for 11 of the 12 years that she was in India in her father-in-law's home in Lucknow. In 1828, Biddy returned to England due to poor health; her husband remained in India.

5 For the sake of brevity and focus, I do not include articles for the most part.

1

South Asian “Lovers” of the Ahl-e Bait: Hindu and Non-Shiʿi Muslim Traditions of Devotion

Who are devotees of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait in South Asia? Do we count only the Shiʿa as active participants in Muharram and other rituals dedicated to Imam Husain and his family? Who are the authors of mourning poetry and stories commemorating the battle of Karbala? As in other parts of the Islamic world, non-Shiʿi communities have long shared in traditions of venerating the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, actively participating in Muharram through the construction of replicas of Imam Husain's shrine-tomb at Karbala (*taʿziya*), and have been celebrated authors of mourning poems in the epic *marsiyah* and the episodic *nauhah* genres that are just as grief-inducing as those written by Shiʿi authors.

In the religious imagination of devotees in diverse locales in the subcontinent, from the Telugu- and Kannada-speaking regions of the Deccan plateau in South India to Panjab and the "Hindi-belt" of North India, the Imams and Ahl-e Bait have been absorbed into the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses. Likewise, the cosmic battle fought between Imam Husain and the ʿUmayyad caliph Yazid's army at Karbala – the ultimate clash between the "good" of preserving the original prophetic message of Muhammad and the "evil" of hereditary kingship divorced from religion – has been reimagined by South Asian Hindus and Muslims as a complement to the great Indic epic traditions narrating tales of duty (*dharma*) and just leadership (*rajadharma*), the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.

Muharram beyond Shiʿism: The "Composite Culture" of Commemorating Karbala in South Asia

With the arrival of Sufis and Shiʿa in the Indian subcontinent beginning at least as early as the eleventh century, Muharram became a distinctly South Asian religious event and ritual. Nadeem Hasnain and Abrar Husain, two sociologists specializing in Shiʿi social practices and institutions, describe Imam Husain as the first *satyagrahi* whose non-violent resistance to Yazid's political tyranny inspired Mahatma Gandhi's anti-colonial movement (1988, 155). According to Hasnain and Husain, traditions of Sunni and Hindu devotion to "Husain baba" reflect the "common heritage and composite culture of our pluralistic society" (1988, 156). In this chapter, the inclusive nature of Muharram ritual, as a

tradition shared and shaped by multiple religious communities, will be demonstrated. The religious conviviality that contributed to the formation of South Asian Muharram ritual, literary traditions, and material practices is often conceived as an expression of a "composite culture" of shared practices of shrine visitation, saint veneration, and their propitiation. This compositeness is usually articulated through the riverine imagery of "Ganga-Yamuni *tahzib*" (culture), a religio-political discourse affirming Indian culture and religion as conducive to positive and deep interreligious encounter. Ganga-Yamuni *tahzib*, a term used by both Hindus and Muslims, incorporates an implicit reference to the Triveni Sangam in Allahabad, one of India's most sacred sites, at which the confluence of the Ganga (symbolizing Hinduism) and the Yamuna (referring to Islam and the Muslim dynasties) Rivers converge with the mythical Saraswati River. The significance of the riverine imagery of the Ganga-Yamuna Rivers invoked in this concept of a composite culture based on the principle of the *sangam* (meeting point, confluence) means that while diverse religious communities participate in and contribute to events such as Muharram, the fundamental integrity and identity of each constituent religious tradition is maintained (Ruffle 2016, 59–60).

Despite the appearance of the convergence of culture and religious practice in the concept of Ganga-Yamuni *tahzib*, I do not classify everyday South Asian Shiʿism or non-Shiʿi practices of ʿAlid devotion as "syncretic." Ganga-Yamuni *tahzib* does not conform to the prevailing models, such as alchemical syncretism, also known as colloidal suspension, that have prevailed in religious studies scholarship to explain the participation of Hindus and Muslims in one another's religious activities in South Asia (Burman 2002; Das 2003; Kassam 1995; Mayaram 1997; Roy 1983; Talib and Mitra 2017; Waseem 2003). A colloidal suspension is the result of two irreconcilable substances coming into contact that will inevitably separate with time; an example of this would be oil and vinegar. As Tony K. Stewart and Carl W. Ernst observe in their discussion of syncretism, "in this model, religious or cultural essence triumphs over history" (2003, 587). Such a syncretic model privileges the notion of the intrinsic purity and original

essence of a religious tradition that is immune to change. The problem with syncretism as a heuristic model is that it is ahistorical, essentialist, and presumes a pure "root" tradition (Stewart and Ernst 2003, 586).

Dr. Syed Akbar Naqvi (d. 2016), a Pakistani art critic, framed the religio-cultural context of South Asian religious pluralism in which Muharram has been shaped by Shiʿi, Hindu, and Sunni communities as one of tolerance (*rawadari*). According to Naqvi, *rawadari* is an integral element of the culture of al-Hind, by which he refers to the religio-cultural and historical heritage of the Indian subcontinent's diverse communities (2010, xxix–xxxi). Naqvi's concept of *rawadari*, while in some respects reflecting the spirit of Ganga-Yamuni *tahzib*, harkens back to the Mughal ethos of *sulh-e kull*, the practice of balance and compromise that promotes harmony and respect toward the non-Muslim "other" (Kinra 2013, 261).

You might wonder why I have included a separate chapter in this book that focuses on non-Shiʿi devotees to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait and their participation in ritual events such as Muharram. In both India and Pakistan, the rhetoric of political and religious actors since the second half of the nineteenth century has emphasized communal and sectarian polarization and the creation of Muslim-Shiʿi "others," causing shared traditions of devotion to fade to the background of public discourse and belying the realities of everyday religious life for practitioners from diverse religious communities – Shiʿi, Sunni, Hindu, and others. The case studies and examples that I present in this chapter point to a more complex religio-cultural history in South Asia in which Shiʿi heroic figures are acclaimed through song, poetry, and stories, and venerated through rituals of offering and vow-making. Their memory is invoked and made present through an astonishing diversity of material objects.

The Husaini Brahmins: Hindu Devotees of Imam Husain

Wah Dutt Sultan,	Oh, King Dutt
Hindu ka Dharm	A follower of the Hindu religion

Musalman ka Iman,	And the Muslim faith,
Adha Hindu, Adha Musalman.	Half Hindu, half Muslim.

Attributed to the mischief-making Sufi chess player of the eleventh century, Wahun Pir, this praise poem is popularly invoked to valorize a group known as the Husaini Brahmins. This caste of brahmins trace their origins to the Gandhara region, located in contemporary northwest Pakistan between Peshawar and Taxila. The region has long been associated with governmental administrative and military service. In addition to being referred to as "Husaini" Brahmins for their rituals of devotion to Imam Husain, which will be discussed below, this caste is more formally known as Mohyal. There are seven groups that make up the clan, including the Datts, mentioned in the poem above.[1]

In India and Pakistan, Hindus actively participate in mourning the martyrdom of Imam Husain and his family at the battle of Karbala. The Husaini Brahmins' ancestor Sultan Rahab Datt is believed to have fought on behalf of Imam Husain's cause at Karbala. According to traditions told by both Indian Shiʿa and the Husaini Brahmins, in the period prior 610 CE when the Prophet Muhammad received his first revelations, and in the years leading up to the battle of Karbala in 680, there was a population of Hindus who lived in Arabia, where they worshipped the god Śiva. These Hindus were involved with the Arabs in the extensive trade networks that crisscrossed land and maritime routes between India and the Middle East. This particular history situates Rahab Datt in close relationship with the Prophet Muhammad and his grandsons Hasan and Husain, and at the battle of Karbala, it is claimed Rahab and his seven sons fought alongside the Imam.

From this frame narrative, multiple versions of the origin story emerge relating how the Mohyal Datts became known as the Husaini Brahmins. One version tells of the terrible moment when Shimr ibn Zi'l-Jawshan, a commander in the ʿUmayyad caliph Yazid's army, cut off Imam Husain's head and trampled his lifeless body beneath the hooves of his horse. In this account, Rahab Datt and his sons had journeyed from Mecca in search of Husain and his entourage, missing

the bloody battle and arriving after the massacre of the Imam and the others on ʿ*ashura* (10 Muharram). Rahab Datt and his sons set off in pursuit of Shimr and the rest of Yazid's army as they triumphantly carried Imam Husain's severed head as a spoil of war. Datt and his sons overtook this grim caravan in Kufa and seized the Imam's head, which they lovingly washed before taking it to Damascus. Of course, Rahab and his sons were captured by Yazid's forces, who demanded return of the Imam's head. Rahab beheaded one of his sons and offered this head in exchange for Husain's blessed head; they refused. He then decapitated his second son, and so on until all seven of his sons were dead, yet Yazid's forces refused to leave without Husain's head – nothing less would suffice. Finally, after one long year, Rahab was left sonless and Husain's head was finally taken to Damascus, where it was buried.[2]

The heroic sacrifice of Rahab's sons and battlefield bravery is recounted in a Panjabi *kabitt*, a poem composed in a four-line quatrain. The *kabitt* narrates the history of the Datts' settlement in Arabia, their battlefield heroism, Rahab's valiant sacrifice of his sons, his unwavering loyalty to Imam Husain, and the return of the Mohyal Datts to North India.

1. Sidh Viyog Datt, warrior styled Sultan, was a descendant of Sidh Jhujha, who settled in Arabia.
2. From his taking up his residence in Arabia he was made Mir-Sidhani. Offering prayers to the Brahm Ad-Guru deity he acknowledged Punj as his priest.
3. He came of the lineage of Bhardwaj the Saint, and settled in Arabia to sacrifice his head in the interests of Husain.
4. The well-known Sahas Rai and Hars Rai, sons of Sidh Datt, are to maintain honour in the field.
5. In the maintenance of honour in the field, they are lions in arms; with dagger in hand they were as strong as Rama.
6. Raipun, the pure-minded, furthers the welfare of his country. Dharo, Miro Datts took to settle in Arabia.
7. When the great warrior Datts issued from Arabia, their mounted forces marched to the music of clarions and camel-drums.
8. In great pomp and grandeur, the Datts readily armed with spear and shield.
9. The Datt braves caused terror in cutting their enemies asunder.
10. The cowards deserting, soon were lost to sight. They (the Datts) helped Husain and never turned back.
11. The Datt warriors alone fought bravely in the field, and plundered the fort of Kufa.

12. When they won the field drum was beaten; Husain
    was avenged and the people shouted “bravo,” “bravo.”
13. The seven sons of Rahib throwing in their lot
    with the faithful few on hapless Husain’s side.
    Died as Datts fighting dreaming their death
    But friendship’s welcome sacrifice.
14. Offspring of Husain! Forget not thy father’s friend
    Rahib, once enthroned in Arabia’s city ere thy father’s end.
    Wherefore the name of Datt recite
    In thy prayers to Allah, at morn and night.
15. From Harya’s Port with uplifted sword
    They entered Rum, Sham, and the dying city trod.
    Their war-cries resounding to the ominous beat
    Of their camel-drums.
16. Ghazni fell to the advancing host then Bukhara
    And turning to the land of Sindh their eyes
    Qandahar soon fell to the victor’s prize.
17. They crossed the Attock, the historic stream, whose bosom bore
    Barbaric host or cultured Macedon. And trod once more
    Their Panjab. Whence with the Macedon in days of yore,
    They sought the fateful Arabian shore.

Source: T.P. Russell Stracey, *History of the Muhiyals: The Militant Brahman Race of India*, 2nd ed. (Lahore: Silver Printing Press, 1938), 127–134.

In the aftermath of Karbala, the Datts demonstrated their unflagging allegiance to Husain’s religious and political cause by joining Mukhtar ibn Abi ʿUbaid al-

Saqafi's (d. 687) rebellion against the ʿUmayyad caliphate.[3] Mukhtar and his rebels staged guerilla warfare against the ʿUmayyad governor ʿUbaidallah ibn Ziad, whose complicity and participation in Imam Husain's martyrdom resulted in the siege and ultimate destruction of the fort at Kufa. Following their battlefield success, Mukhtar established a quarter in Kufa for the Hindus, the Daʾir-e Hindiyyah, the Indian quarter, which exists even today. In the eighth century, the Datts faced revenge and oppression from the ʿUmayyads for their ʿAlid loyalty. This caused many of the Datts and other *sayyids* or blood descendants of the Prophet Muhammad to migrate to India. Upon returning to the subcontinent, they acquired the name "Husaini Brahmin."

According to Nonica Dutt, a history professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, the loyalty Husaini Brahmins have for Imam Husain is inscribed on their bodies. In a meeting with the Pakistani Urdu author Intizar Hussain (d. 2016), Professor Dutt, a Husaini Brahmin herself, described the ritual cutting of *mundan*: "Now, I will tell you about a sign each and every Husaini Brahman carries with him/her. On his/her throat s/he bears a line of cutting, which is indicative of the fact that s/he is the descendant of those Brahmans whose throats were cut in the battle of Karbala" (Husain 2008, 298). After the birth of a child, Husaini Brahmins, like other Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities, observe the ritual of the first cutting of a child's hair, usually in either the first or third year of life. This first cutting of a lock of hair is an auspicious purifying act performed to ensure the long life of the child and to protect him or her from the evil eye (*nazr* or *kartut*). For the Husaini Brahmins, the *mundan* ceremony has an added symbolic dimension; in addition to tonsuring the child's hair, a small cut is made along the neckline to symbolize the throats of Imam Husain, his family, and supporters at Karbala, cut by Yazid's army.

This overview of the history of the Husaini Brahmins' origin story, of which I relate just two of multiple narratives, does not aim to determine historical truth. Rather, my goal is to reveal the ways in which Husaini Brahmins place their ancestor in proximity to the Prophet Muhammad, and to Imam Husain at the

battle of Karbala, thus validating their martial caste status and their traditions of ʿAlid devotion.

Husaini Brahmins have traditionally been visible and committed participants in Muharram ritual. During Muharram in cities such as Delhi, multiple religious communities continue to take *taʿziya*, replicas of Imam Husain's shrine-tomb at Karbala made of a bamboo frame covered with colored paper and flowers, and metal standards known as ʿ*alams* that represent individual members of the Ahl-e Bait, out in procession on the days leading up to ʿ*ashura*. In Kalyanpuri in east Delhi, Husaini Brahmins take a *taʿziya* out in procession on ʿ*ashura*, and they publicly weep and participate in acts of self-flagellation known as *matam* to show their love for Imam Husain and his family (Akram 2014). Husaini Brahmins fast on 10 Muharram and wear black clothing during the days of mourning, the *ayyam-e ʿaza*, to show their solidarity with the Shiʿa, with whom they share the memory of Husain's sacrifice and suffering at Karbala.

The Husaini Brahmins remain steadfast in their loyalty and devotion to Imam Husain, although some reports indicate that younger members of the community are moving away from public participation in Muharram *taʿziya* processions, including setting up *sabil* stalls to distribute water and cooling fruit-flavored *sharbat* drinks. Yoginder Sikand has described the Husaini Brahmins as a "rapidly vanishing community" in terms of its youth moving away from participation in boundary-crossing ritual and devotional practices (Sikand 2004). Despite pressure exerted by both Hindu and Muslim ideologues to conform to clearly defined religious boundaries, the history and devotional practices of the Husaini Brahmins point to the universal message of striving for political justice and good governance that Imam Husain's opposition to Yazid represents.

Pirla-Panduga: "The Festival of *Pirs*" among Hindus and Sunnis in South India

Don't weep Don't weep innocent Fatima

We will come and go once in a year

Maulali is our father Mohammad is our grand father

…

The name of Allah is a protection for you

The blessings of gods and demigods on you.

All the lords went to Sadanabadiri

They held a procession in Sadanabadiri.

(Telugu Muharram song quoted in B. Rama Raju 2004, 21)

The Deccan plateau is a semi-arid region shaped like a triangle located in the southern part of India. Deccan is the English derivation of the Prakrit word *dakkhin*, which itself is derived from the Sanskrit, *dakshina*, southern, referring to the region's location. The modern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, and Maharashtra are four of the eight states that comprise the Deccan region. Beginning in the fourteenth century the Deccan was ruled by a series of Muslim dynasties, some of which espoused Shiʿism as their state religion. This was particularly true of the Qutb Shahs of Golconda-Hyderabad (r. ca. 1496–1687), who were steadfastly Shiʿa, and the ʿAdil Shahs of Bijapur (r. 1489–1686), where a number of sultans also professed a Shiʿi orientation. The Muslim rulers of the Deccan sultanates ruled as religious minorities over their numerically superior Hindu subjects. For the Shiʿi sultanates, particularly the Qutb Shahs, these kings ruled as Muslims who were affiliated with a minority community within a larger Deccan melting pot made up of different religious sub-groups that we tend to label under the rubric of Hinduism: Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas, Śaktas, and Lingayats.

The Qutb Shahi sultans were members of a microscopic elite community ruling over diverse communities of people professing devotion to various gods and goddesses and different expressions of Islam, including devotion to the Prophet's family, the Ahl-e Bait, and to Sufi saints, the *pirs* whose tomb-shrines populate the Deccan plateau. It was in the Qutb Shahs' political interests to cultivate these devotional practices and find emotional, material, and ritual linkages to Muharram and the commemoration of Imam Husain's martyrdom at Karbala. Based on the diverse political, social, and religious milieux of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Deccan, it made sense that Shiʿism, Muharram, and everything associated with its commemoration needed to become "Indian." How does Muharram become Indian and why might it matter? Through their patronage and sponsorship of Muharram rituals, how did the Qutb Shahi sultans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries introduce and make meaningful Imam Husain, his nephew Qasem, the bridegroom of Karbala, his half-brother ʿAbbas, the valiant water-carrier (*saqqah*), and Fatimah, who bears eternal witness to the suffering of her family, to Hindus and Sunnis living in towns and villages far beyond the imperial capital of Hyderabad? How was this received in the region's villages and towns among non-Shiʿi communities with no cultural memory of Karbala and Imam Husain? ʿAlid devotion was encouraged by tapping into the devotional modes and motifs of local Hindu and Sufi-oriented communities, primarily through personalized and intimate devotion to a chosen deity through the practice of *bhakti*. ʿAlid modalities of intense and emotional devotion were expressed in three ways: first, as love for the family of the Prophet Muhammad, the Ahl-e Bait; second, through the veneration of Sufi spiritual masters (*pir*) at their tomb-shrines; and third, through the prevailing motif of hero worship in social, religious, and politic life in South Asia, particularly in the Deccan, where the figure of Qasem in particular is glorified as the bridegroom-hero, *dula-vira* (van Skyhawk 2008, 128).

In towns and villages throughout Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, northern Karnataka, and in parts of Maharashtra since the late sixteenth century, a variant of Muharram known in Telugu as *pirla panduga*, the "festival of *pirs*," is

celebrated by Hindus and Sunni Muslims. *Pirla panduga* can be understood from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, it is a ritual of cultural memory of the martyrdom of Imam Hasan and Imam Husain at Karbala that is imagined through hyperlocalized contexts and refracted through the Indic epic traditions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Despite the inclination one might have to describe *pirla panduga* as an exemplum of the ethic of "give-and-take" that has historically characterized the fuzzy boundaries of Indian religious identity formation prior to the establishment of the British Raj in the mid-nineteenth century, we must consider the ways in which this form of Muharram, in the absence of Shiʿi ritual practitioners and outside of urban centers, maintains a fundamentally "Muslim" identity. This Muslim identity, albeit one that reflects highly localized cultural, linguistic, caste, and gender values, uses the events of Karbala and other saintly figures who become associated with Imam Husain to link together cultural memory through sacred objects, poetry, and the mapping of sacred space that is connected with the construction of sacred buildings for ritual and pilgrimage activities.

Pirla panduga blends an expression of Islam that is deeply inflected with Sufism and South Indian *bhakti*, and incorporates elements of hero-worship. Muharram-*pirla panduga* rituals center around a core group of figures from Shiʿi history: Imam Husain, Imam Hasan, Fatimah al-Zahra, ʿAbbas, and Qasem. In the ritual domain of *pirla panduga*, history is compressed, bringing Fatimah (d. ca. 633) and the second Imam, Hasan (d. 670), into the action of the battle of Karbala although they both died long before the actual event. Devotees cry out, "Hasan! Husain!" or "Asan! Usan!" in the Deccani regional languages of Telugu, Kannada, and Marathi. This enumerative compound (Sanskrit: *iteratara dvandva*) represents Hasan and Husain as a martyred pair, never as individuals. While Imam Hasan was not present at Karbala, the slogans shouted by devotees form a *dvandva* unit with his brother Husain through which multiple forms of memory are invoked. The brothers are variously valorized as heroic warriors (*vira*), they are venerated and feared as powerful demi-gods whose wrath (*ugra*) must be avoided, and they are loved as saintly figures.

Devotion to*Piru-Swami*

Muharram devotional rituals among Sunnis and Hindus in the Deccan are centered around metal standards that are called *pir* in Telugu. Shiʿa and Urdu speakers know these metal crests representing Imam Husain and members of the Ahl-e Bait as an ʿ*alam*, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 4. In Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere in the Deccan, the *pir* takes on blended Hindu-Muslim names such as *piru-swami* (*pir*-lord), *pirla-devullu* (*pir* gods), or the Muslim "Turk" god, *turaka devudu* (Mohammad 2013, 16). The word *pir* has traditionally been associated with Sufism and exemplary individuals who have accomplished spiritual mastery and even performed miracles (*karamat*). The *pir* devotion associated with the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Husain, and other religious exemplars is accorded a casteless and "god-like" status in the Deccan (Mohammad 2013, 11). By referring to metal crests as *piru-swami*, the spiritual power and charisma of the Sufi *pir*, the material objects associated with Muharram, and the absorption of Muslim saints and prophets into the Hindu pantheon is established by compounding Urdu (Islamic) and Telugu (Hindu) terms.

Among the Telugu-speaking weaver communities along the Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka border, *pirla panduga* has most likely been celebrated since the seventeenth century, when the Qutb Shahi sultans spent lavish sums of money to foster the observance of Muharram in the districts beyond the imperial capital of Hyderabad. Lacking reliable written sources to document the celebration of *pirla panduga* in this area prior to the mid-nineteenth century, we are obliged to turn to the British *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, created by William W. Hunter in 1869 and published in 1881. The *Imperial Gazetteer of India* offers a statistical account of the history, geography, populations, and economic practices of the different regions under British administration, including parts of the Deccan. British colonial observers of Hindus and Sunnis performing rituals associated with Shiʿism described the veneration of *pirs* in towns and villages in the Deccan as "Hindu Muharram" (Kanalu 2016, 130). The British did not realize that centuries before, the Deccan sultans spent vast sums of money to sponsor and

promote the celebration of Muharram in towns and villages far beyond the imperial capital, institutionalizing a cultural memory of Imam Husain and the events of Karbala through narrative forms and ritual and material practices that acquired the cultural imprint of Deccan rural life. Muharram was not simply an urban religious phenomenon. Nor did they understand the elasticity that characterizes everyday religion in South Asia, where a complex repertoire of narratives and material images can be woven together from multiple traditions, both Hindu and Muslim, to create an expansive universe in which Hasan-Husain and Rama-Śiva are all heroic figures, and where Fatimah and Sita fuse together as paradigms of female piety and women's suffering.

When Muharram begins, Sunnis and Hindu weaver castes prepare the *pirla-devullu*, which most often take the shape of metal hands (*panjah*) made of silver, bronze, or brass, for installation outside the local mosque or in the town square (*katte*) under a banyan tree (Kanalu 2016, 132). *Panjahs* are also installed in special *pirla-makanam* or *pirla devullu gudi*, buildings for their display and for the performance of special offerings and supplications by devotees. Both *pirla-makanam* and *pirla devullu gudi* are compound phrases in which the first word *pir* is the Urdu term meaning "lord." *Makanam* is also an Urdu word that has been "Telugu-ized," meaning house. *Pirla devullu gudi* is a compound of Urdu and two Telugu words, to convey the meaning, "the *pir* deities' temple" (Kanalu 2016, 132–133). The ways in which this space is built and defined as sacred is inherently Islamic because the *panjah* is understood by its devotees as representing the spiritual power of Muslim spiritual heroes of the past (the Prophet Muhammad, Husain, Hasan, Fatimah, and Sufi saints). Significantly, these spaces and objects are shaped by a shared South Asian spiritual economy through which contiguous patterns of everyday religious practice, including supplicatory vows, processions, poetry, and song facilitate the integration of Hindu practices into *pirla panduga*.

Panjahs are usually installed in pairs, either Hasan-Husain or the Prophet Muhammad and his daughter Fatimah. The larger, foremost of the *panjahs* is the *pedda devudu* ("big" deity), and the smaller is the *sanna devudu*. Hasan is always

represented as the “big” deity and Husain as the “little” deity. Throughout the Deccan, Hasan is always venerated as the *pedda devudu* in *pirla panduga* because of his status as the eldest brother. The *panjahs* are considered wrathful (*ugra*) figures, possessed of extraordinary power that must be supplicated and respected by its devotees. Hasan-Husain *panjahs* frequently take the form of sword and shield (*isi* and *gurani*), reinscribing these brothers as valiant warriors on the Karbala battlefield in the religious imagination. Naveen Kanalu has observed that the explicit representation of the Hasan-Husain *panjahs* as weapons through sword and shield iconography, as well by attaching bamboo shoots and red cloth, invokes an incident from the epic *Mahabharata* when Arjuna hid weapons for his four other Pandava brothers in a banyan tree before they went into hiding for one year in the kingdom of Virata. Significantly, the weapons are recovered by Arjuna to fight their enemies the Kauravas when they come to capture cows – a recurring theme in blended narratives about Hasan and Husain in South Asia, which portray them as Muslim (and vaguely Shiʿi) protectors of cows, and therefore sympathetic to Hindu religious values (summarized from Kanalu 2016, 132; see also van Skyhawk 2008, 135).

Ownership of the *pirla-devullu* in some towns along the Andhra Pradesh-Karnataka border is maintained by Sunni families. Hindus contribute money to the upkeep of the *panjahs*, however, the fact that Sunni families claim hereditary ownership reflects a fundamentally Islamic tinge to the performance of *pirla panduga*. Despite the monopoly on ownership of the *panjahs* by Sunni minority groups in these towns, *pirla panduga* asserts a strongly Hindu tone due to the diverse castes and communities that participate and contribute to the festival’s ritual economy. When the new moon is sighted at the beginning of the month of Muharram, a pit is dug outside the mosque (*masidu* in Telugu) following the call to prayer. The Hasan-Husain *panjahs* are removed from the trees from which they hang during the year and are installed by the pits. After the *panjahs* are removed from the trees they are attached to long bamboo sticks and decorated with green and red cloths, and they may also be adorned with parasols, floral garlands, and peacock feathers. During the ten days of Muharram, devotees fast

in memory of Hasan and Husain's suffering at Karbala, which includes abstaining from sexual intercourse, drinking alcohol, or chewing pan. Some people, particularly men and boys, may go around their village during Muharram begging for food to remember the suffering of the inhabitants of Damascus who had insufficient food during Yazid's reign. Hospitality is also shown toward the *panjahs*; devotees offer puffed rice, palm sugar, and incense over which the opening verses of the Qurʾan (*Fatihah*) are recited. Some of the offerings are distributed to festival participants and the remainder is returned as blessed food (*tabarruk* or *prasad*) to take home and share with the family.

On each of the ten days of Muharram, a different *panjah* is taken out in a procession through the village. Each procession focuses on the martyrdom of a different Karbala hero or local saint. Some *pirs*, however, were never at Karbala, such as Kullyappa ("the Lord with the cap"), the *pir-swami* at the center of pilgrimage and Muharram rituals in Gugudu, Andhra Pradesh, who is considered by locals a member of the Ahl-e Bait and a founding saint of the town.[4] Outside of the urban context of Hyderabad, the largest city in the Deccan with its long Shiʿi history and minority community concentrated in the Old City, the *pirla panduga* variant of Muharram is intensely localized, making it difficult to generalize about how Husain's martyrdom is commemorated, although I shall highlight some continuities in practice and belief.

Pirla panduga and veneration of the *pirs* is auspicious, bringing good fortune and spiritual reward for the coming year. The practice of temporary asceticism (*faqiri*) in emulation of the *pirs* can help individuals to cultivate an improved moral and ethical outlook. *Pirla panduga* fosters a spirit of generosity and charity among its devotees, who offer red clay pots known as *matkis* or *dutti* that are filled with a palm sugar *sharbat* to the *pirs* as a way of remembering that Imam Husain and his family were denied food and water from 7 Muharram, causing terrible thirst for the children. Water, bread, and other special foods are distributed as *prasad* (leavings) after they are offered by devotees to the *pir*. These foods are also specially prepared and distributed to participants during *pirla panduga* and to the poor during these festive days as a meritorious act. On

10 Muharram, large numbers of people gather in villages, and thousands congregate in the pilgrimage town of Gugudu for the fire-walking ritual, which is known as *ag ka matam*. Wood is gathered to make a roaring fire that is burnt down to hot embers that are spread out in the firepit (*alava*) to make a gauntlet over which devotees walk barefoot, some carrying the *pir*. This act is performed in memory of the scorching heat and hot sands of Karbala that Husain and his entourage endured. The feet of the faithful do not get burned as they walk across the *alava*. The fire-walk is a test of faith (*imanu*) that is a central tenet of the temporary asceticism of *faqiri* that is encapsulated in this explanation by Obulesu, a Dalit devotee of Kullyappa, the *pir*-saint of Gugudu:

> Once we put on the red thread, our *imaanu* [faith] reaches its pinnacle. Since our *imaan* is stronger, even if we walk through fire we won't feel the heat of it. You cannot see anyone complaining, not even of simple bruises. *Niyyatu*[5] [pure intention] is important. *Faqiri* ritual actually prepares you for everything, including the final fire-walk. So, the fire-walk is an ultimate test for our purity in performing rituals. Sometimes even Muslims wonder how this could happen! Purity has no caste. If you've a real heart, *pirs* even walk to you and embrace you.
>
> Source: Afsar Mohammad, "Following the *Pir*: Temporary Asceticism and Village Religion in South India," in *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual*, vol. 5, *Transfer and Space*, ed. Axel Michaels, Gita Dharampal-Frick, Robert Langer, and Nils Holger-Petersen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 160.

Once the physical and spiritual test of the fire-walk is passed, the mood lightens and the *pir* is taken for a final procession through the streets receiving offerings of palm sugar. Offerings of incense ash are received by devotees, which is taken to place on body parts of themselves and their families in need of healing. The final act is the immersion of the *pirs* in a river or other body of water, where the bamboo poles and cloths that decorate it are removed and discarded until next year. The return of the *pir* to its resting place is accompanied by a cry, "*albida, albida*," farewell, farewell.

Dulha! Dulha!: Sunni and Hindu Possession Rituals for the Bridegroom Qasem

Imam Husain is undoubtedly the subject of intense devotion in the subcontinent by Shiʿa, as well as diverse religious groups, both Muslim and Hindu. The martyrdom of Qasem, the 13-year-old son of Imam Hasan, is observed on 7 Muharram in special mourning assemblies known as *mehndi ki majlis* to commemorate his battlefield wedding to Husain's ten-year-old daughter Fatimah Kubra. Throughout the subcontinent, Qasem's intercessory powers are harnessed through the *naʿl sahib*, the horseshoe that came from Imam Husain's loyal horse Zuljanah, which was brought to the Deccan by a pilgrim in the sixteenth century. When the *naʿl sahib* relic was established in Hyderabad in the sixteenth century, people began to believe that Qasem's spirit resided in it. *ʿAlams* called *naʿl sahib* associated with Qasem proliferate in the Deccan and are much revered by Hindus who make offerings and petitions to it for assistance in getting married, becoming pregnant, or protecting the family from illness or harm. There is also a strong tradition of spirit possession connected to rituals focused on Qasem the warrior-bridegroom (*dulha*).

In these henna mourning assemblies, poems and narratives are recounted that describe the wedding rituals of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra as explicitly South Asian. They perform the pre-wedding *mehndi* and *sachaq* rituals in which the families of the bride and groom exchange gifts. The joy of the battlefield wedding between these two exceptional youths is tragically ended when Qasem was martyred on the battlefield. Amplifying the impact of this catastrophic event, Fatimah Kubra and Qasem's marriage was unconsummated.

In a Telugu song of mourning, Husain's sister Zainab recounts the joyous wedding rituals that took place just moments before Qasem went to the battlefield where he fought heroically, slaying many of Yazid's most fearsome commanders before being martyred. The following Telugu poem interweaves the auspicious dress, food offerings, adornment practices, and matrimonial rituals

that bond together a couple with Zainab's lament of the incompletion of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra's wedding:

The thread bound on the wrist is not yet removed O Khasim O Husain

The heap of rice poured in your skirt is not yet untied O Khasim O Husain

The trinket worn on the forehead is not yet taken off O Khasim O Husain

The coils of the turban have not yet been unfolded O Khasim O Husain

The new pajama bought the day before yesterday has not yet been put on O Khasim O Husain

The blanket bought the day before yesterday has not been put on O Khasim O Husain

The shirt that you wore is not effaced O Khasim O Husain

The crease of the cap that you wore the day before yesterday is still afresh O Khasim O Husain

The candy distributed yesterday is still in stock O Khasim O Husain

The dry *khajur* [dates] distributed yesterday is still in stock O Khasim O Husain

The garlands plaited yesterday are still unwithered O Khasim O Husain

The *panbidas*[6] prepared yesterday are still unused O Khasim O Husain.

(B. Rama Raju 2004, 22–23)

The event that Zainab describes in this poem seems to be suspended in mid-action. A series of rituals have been performed, however none of them have been completed, leaving each act in a state of limbo. In each line of the poem Zainab describes a wedding that hangs in ritual suspension, the listener understands the immediacy of two intertwined events, the battlefield wedding and Qasem's martyrdom are nearly simultaneous and calamitous events.

Only exemplary youth such as Fatimah Kubra and Qasem, through the specifically Indianized gender roles and rituals that cast them as spiritual and

socio-ethical exemplars and by virtue of their blood relationship to the Prophet Muhammad, can endure such tribulations. The first stanza of an epic *marsiyah* poem written by the eighteenth-century North Indian poet Mir Muhammad Rafiʿ Sauda (d. 1781) echoes the sense of the "unnaturalness" of Fatimah Kubra and Qasem's battlefield wedding:

Friends! Hear of the injustice wrought by the celestial orb!

For the son of Hasan, it has set its heart on an unnatural wedding;

That bride and groom have joined together in such a union,

The shroud's inauspicious thread has been tied to this wedding.

(Adapted from Ruffle 2011, 136)

The final line of the first stanza of Sauda's *marsiyah* is echoed in the opening line of the Telugu mourning song in which Zainab describes the rituals of an idealized South Asian wedding turned upside down: The shroud's inauspicious thread has been tied to this wedding (Sauda) / The thread bound on the wrist is not yet removed O Khasim O Husain (Telugu mourning song). In the Telugu song, the *kautuka* is a thread that is bound on the groom's right and bride's left wrist before the marriage ceremony (Goldman 2005, 391). The threads or fabric of the funeral shroud (*kafan*) is in diametrical opposition to the auspicious act of tying the wedding thread binding together groom and bride as husband and wife. The funeral shroud permanently and irrevocably shatters that marital bond, which we see in the following stanzas of Sauda's *marsiyah*:

It was that severed head that was the family's henna ceremony,

Like *sachaq* pots bound about an elephant, such are the wounds around his neck.

In this vile circumstance, the bridegroom's gift to his bride was his sleeve,

In what land is there such a tradition of *sachaq?*

The bride's tray of *mehndi* has come,

The in-laws have been congealed in the brother-in-law's blood;

The bride has smeared her hand in her husband's blood,

This color is the mode of the wedding season.

No sooner was the bride adorned for union with her husband,

Then she said, "There is no remedy from God for this state of widowhood.

For whom he gave everything, he went to battle and was slain

Now, what is the point of this passion and love?"

Removing her nose ring, she surrendered it over to me,

She admonished herself, pouring dust over her head in grief.

The corpse is coming, where are his mourners?

Now is not the time for words and discourses.

(Adapted from Ruffle 2011, 137)

These stanzas of Sauda's *marsiyah* describe South Asian wedding customs that largely have their origins with Hindu communities, and which have been adopted by Muslims and made their own. Fatimah Kubra's status as a girl-widow is a popular theme for Indian poets and *majlis* orators (*zakir*); she is simultaneously represented as strong and pathos-inducing because of her willingness to sacrifice her husband and her auspicious status for the political and religious cause of Islam. On 7 Muharram, the day in the Karbala cycle dedicated to Qasem's battlefield wedding and martyrdom, poetry and mourning assembly discourses focus on the proper performance of Indian wedding rituals, and the expression of

South Asian anxieties and taboos about widows and their remarriage (Ruffle 2011, 110).[7]

The deep cultural, religious, and social pressures exerted on men and women to marry compels devotees to seek Qasem's intercession. Seeking assistance from the "bridegroom of Karbala" is a popular act performed by unmarried men and women during Muharram. On 7 Muharram, unmarried people attend mourning assemblies and enthusiastically reach for the trays of henna (*mehndi*) that are passed around when Qasem's *ʿalam* is taken out in its dual wedding-funeral procession. An unmarried person takes a small amount of the henna paste and smears it on the right palm (*mehndi lagana*) in a small circle with the belief that Qasem's spiritual power will produce a good marriage alliance. The frenzy that the passing around of the *mehndi* tray creates highlights the premium that is placed on marriage in Indian cultures (Ruffle 2011, 127).

Following on the vows made over the henna tray (*mehndi ki mannat*) seeking Qasem's intercession in finding a good husband or wife, so too is the bridegroom-warrior's assistance requested in the granting of children. Qasem's assumption of the *naʿl sahib* ("sir horseshoe") form, referring to the horseshoe from Imam Husain's horse Zuljanah, is manifested in his role as the protector of children (himself childless), sought out by female devotees to intercede in all manner of child-related issues. *Naʿl sahib* induces young men to enter into trancelike or possessed states in which he variously inhabits the body of Zuljanah, galloping through the streets, or carries the heavy *ʿalam* as though bearing the body of the martyr.

Jaffur Shurreef's 1832 ethnography of Deccani Muslim religious practices includes a lengthy description of rituals associated with Qasem, including women's supplications for the birth and protection of children:

On the way from place to place the Dūlā[8] is stopped by wives praying for the blessing of children, or the removal of a rival, or the casting out of a Jinn or other evil spirit. To secure a son the Dūlā general directs a flower or two to be plucked from the jasmine garlands that deck his rod, a bar of silver or iron ending in a crescent or horseshoe, and covered with peacock feathers … No woman can be possessed by the Dūlā spirits …

Some, in ignorance of the Law, make a thing like a human figure, and put the horseshoe on it as a head … A woman makes a vow to the horseshoe, "If through thy favour I am blessed with a son I promise to make him run with thy procession." Should a son be born to her she puts a parasol in his hand and makes him run with it … Something of the bridegroom's spirit is supposed to dwell in the horseshoe, which works miraculous cures.

> Source: Jaʿfar Sharif, *Islam in India: Or the Qānūn-i-Islām: The Customs of the Musalmāns of India*, ed. William Crooke, trans. G.A. Herklots (London: Routledge, [1921, 1972] 2017), 158ff.

This condensation of Shurreef's[9] account of the *dulha* procession reveal two ways women petition the *naʿl sahib ʿalam* associated with Qasem. Women pray directly to the *ʿalam* asking for the blessing of pregnancy or for an ill child to be cured. Qasem's intercession through the *ʿalam* directs women to either pluck flowers from garlands that are placed around its "neck" or other parts of its body (for discussion of the anthropomorphic qualities of the *ʿalam*, see Chapter 4). Women also make vows (*nazr o niyaz* or *mannat*) to the *naʿl sahib ʿalam* promising that should a son be born; she will make him it run in the procession for a certain number of years in fulfillment of her request. Qasem is also believed to heal sick children. Mothers who have made vows to the bridegroom (*dulha*) dress their child in green and send him out to beg the next year during Muharram to fulfill their vow and as a form of humility and gratitude for Qasem's protection (Kunte 1977, 350, quoted in van Skyhawk 2008, 131).

As the *naʿl sahib*, Qasem is channeled by young male devotees in South Asia through rituals of possession, an explicitly masculine Muharram ritual. In Banaras in North India, a young man taking the form of the possessed *dulha* (bridegroom) inhabiting Qasem's *naʿl sahib* persona rears through the narrow streets and lanes restrained by a group of caretakers. A blurring of boundaries between the duality that the *naʿl sahib* indexes is witnessed in the young man's possession. Is he possessed by Zuljanah, or it is the bridegroom-warrior Qasem who possesses him? In his state of possession, the young man exerts tremendous strength as he drags the group of men who hold him to protect him as he runs through the streets, and he exhibits spiritual might as he traverses burning coals with his bare feet. Hours later he returns to the *dargah* where he began and leaves his trance, an extraordinarily powerful, transformative, and exhausting experience (Katz 2004, DVD).

The Shrine of Bibi Pak Daman in South Asian Muslim Cultural Memory

In South Asia's Shiʿi sacred geography, Lahore stands alone as the one place where six women of the Ahl-e Bait who survived the battle of Karbala are buried. Bibi Pak Daman is a small shrine located down a long brick-paved alley, lined with stalls selling religious books, devotional objects, flowers, and ornately embroidered cloths (*chadar*) to present to the tombs that contain the tombs of Ruqayyah bint ʿAli ibn Abi Talib[10] and five other female relatives identified as either her daughters or the sisters of Muslim ibn ʿAqil, a cousin of Imam Husain, who was martyred by the Kufan governor Ibn Ziad (Zaidi 2014, 307). Ruqayyah's tomb is believed by her devotees to predate the shrine-tombs of the myriad Sufi male saints that populate Lahore, including that of Sayyid ʿAli al-Hujwiri (d. 1072), popularly known as Data Ganj Bakhsh, who frequently performed visitation (*ziyarah*) to Bibi Pak Daman, where he meditated and prayed. According to the hagiographical narratives that circulate in Lahore and throughout Pakistan to explain how these six women appeared there, the city's Shiʿi essence derives from Ruqayyah's father, ʿAli's foretelling the challenges

and suffering that would befall his children and grandchildren at the hands of their ʿUmayyad rivals. ʿAli instructed Ruqayyah that she should travel east to Sindh and Hind after the battle that was to come, which would cause the martyrdom of her brothers. There, he promised the people would be open to their Muslim identity and be loving followers of the Ahl-e Bait (Zaidi 2014, 309).

There are several types of stories about Ruqayyah and more generally about the Bibi Pak Daman shrine that tell about its origins, establishing a link between the Ahl-e Bait, Lahore's physical landscape, and the epic heroes of the *Ramayana*, particularly Sita. Bibi Pak Daman participates in a broader shrine or "*dargah* culture" that transcends the communal categories "Hindu" or "Muslim" and resists notions of syncretic or hybrid practice (Bellamy 2011, 6). Bibi Pak Daman and other Muslim saint shrines are both local and cosmopolitan, which we saw in our discussion of Deccani Muharram rituals, and will observe in future chapters on material objects, built space, and literature and aesthetics. I draw on Carla Bellamy's study of the Husain Tekri shrine complex in Madhya Pradesh, which she describes as "ambiguously Islamic," (Bellamy 2011, 113). Not tied to a particular religious tradition, it is rather specifically South Asian, drawing on subcontinental religious discourses, themes, and values that are understandable and meaningful to devotees. Bibi Pak Daman is likewise an explicitly South Asian shrine. Like other South Asian Islamic shrines, "the sources of the site's authority are not fixed, but rather are determined by context, audience, and constantly changing combinations of Islamic names, narratives, and objects; these sources are in some cases historically Islamic, and in other cases equally at home in both the greater Islamic and greater Hindu traditions" (Bellamy 2011, 18).

The narratives told about Ruqayyah emphasize her piety, bravery, chastity, and ability to triumph over her tormenters, ultimately inspiring them to convert to Islam based on her exemplary model. Most narratives about ʿAli's daughter are rooted in ambiguity, ending with Ruqayyah and her five companions passing into a state of occultation (*ghaybah*). The concept of *ghaybah* developed as a central theological tenet for the Ithna ʿAshari ("Twelver") Shiʿa with the "greater

occultation" (*al-ghaybah al-kubra*) of the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, in 941 CE. One hagiographical narrative intriguingly establishes a parallel between Ruqayyah and Sita, King Rama's wife, the queen of the dharmic kingdom of Ayodhya and heroine of Valmiki's Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*, in which she is swallowed by the earth after being asked to complete a second ordeal to prove her fidelity to her husband. According to tradition Ruqayyah, likewise, was swallowed up by the earth.

The origin narrative of Bibi Pak Daman begins when Husain's eldest son, the fourth Imam Zain al-ʿAbidin, the lone male to survive the battle of Karbala, dispatched Ruqayyah, her five companions, and a caravan of 300 members of the Bani Hashem from Medina in 685 CE for India. In Sindh, Ruqayyah preached the message of Islam and told people about the tribulations endured by her family. Moved by her words, many Hindus converted to Islam, which caught the attention of some of the local Hindu *rajas*, as well as the ʿUmayyad caliph in far-away Damascus. So concerned about the situation were the ʿUmayyads, they sent the general Muhammad ibn Qasem, future conqueror of Sindh, to capture Ruqayyah and bring her back to Damascus. Like countless others, Qasem was entranced by Ruqayyah's oratorical skill and instead became a devotee of the Ahl-e Bait! Soon after, the *raja* of Jaisalmer aligned with the ʿUmayyads to arrest Ruqayyah and bring her to trial for her sedition, although this was soon thwarted by the conversion of the king's son to Ruqayyah's message of devotion.

The situation for Ruqayyah, her family, and her followers seemed little different in India than it had under ʿUmayyad political rule in the Middle East. The message of Karbala and its ethic of justice (ʿadalah) was empowering for many new devotees to the Ahl-e Bait. However, it proved to be an intractable problem for those in power who sought to silence her and eliminate her subversive teachings. As opposition mounted, Ruqayyah gathered together the women of her family and they prayed to God for His help. At that moment, a hole opened up in the earth, swallowing the six women. For Hindu converts this moment echoes a similar moment in Tulsidas's sixteenth-century Awadhi recension of the *Ramayana*, the *Ramcaritmanas* (The lake of the deeds of Rama) when Sita is

asked by her husband King Rama to submit to a second trial by fire (*agnipariksha*) to prove her fidelity. This event is narrated in an appended concluding chapter of the *Ramcaritmanas*, the *Uttarakanda*, in which Sita, fed up with her husband's inability to trust her fidelity, asks Mother Earth (from which she was born) to take her back in proof of her chastity.

Since Ruqayyah likewise vanished into the earth, her devotees believe that she never died. Instead, they believe she is in a state of occultation (*ghaybah*) in which she is simultaneously absent and alive but not physically present. Accordingly, we cannot describe Ruqayyah's shrine as a tomb because she is not dead and buried. The lack of a body further complicates the articulation of sacred space and its gendering at Bibi Pak Daman. For devotees, the lack of the six women's bodies means that the walls that were erected around the site where they went into occultation had to be protected by a veil (*hijab*) and through the practice of sexual segregation (*purdah*). Traditionally, this meant that men were not allowed to enter the sacred precinct of the shrine (a more extended discussion of this tradition appears in Ruffle 2015).

A rich repertoire of gendered rituals in which Shiʿi, Sunni, and Hindu women participate center on votive requests and intercessory petitions for the conception of a baby, success for a child in study or work, and the curing of sickness. A popular tradition tells that the six camels that Ruqayyah and her five companions rode from Medina to India were swallowed up by the earth at the same time as the six pure women. These camels were turned into different types of trees, which can be found in the shrine complex. Most notable is a large wan tree with a thick, gnarled trunk. Women seeking to conceive a baby chew on the leaves of this wan tree (Khalid 2017). Infertile couples are given five leaves, each person chewing two and a half leaves in order for the woman to conceive (Chawla, Shoeb and Iftikhar 2016, 234). As we can see, at some point in the history of Bibi Pak Daman, entry to the shrine was restricted to women in order to protect the saints' honor (ʿ*izzat*) and sexual purity through the imposition of sexual segregation (*purdah*), excluding men from the "tomb" precinct where devotees believe the women went into occultation.

These overlapping narratives and miraculous acts performed have made Bibi Pak Daman a sacred space of intercession and place of prayer for Shiʿi, Sunni, and Hindu women, causing disputes about the sectarian orientation of the shrine and leading to intervention by the Chief Administrator of Auqaf[11] in the Central Zone of Lahore. In post-Independence India, the Wakf Act 1954 placed all *awqaf* under governmental control. Administration and upkeep of mosques, *dargahs*, *imambaras*, *ʿashurkhanahs*, and the payment of salaries for *qazis* (*shariʿah* court judges), imams, and *dargah* attendants (*khadim*) fall under the purview of the Wakf Act 1954 (amended in 1995), and later of individual state *waqf* boards. A similar situation prevails in Pakistan. The government of Ayub Khan (1958–1969) implemented the West Pakistan Auqaf Properties Ordinance, 1959 and established the Ministry of Auqaf in order to rein in the perceived power wielded by Sufi *pirs* in the countryside. As with India, all of Pakistan's provinces and territories maintain *waqf* boards, which have diminished the individual control and administrative power of religious institutions.

During ongoing renovations that took place at the shrine between 1968–1970, sectarian tensions developed between Sunnis and Shiʿas regarding community rights to engrave the names of their holy figures within the shrine precincts. While the gravestones for the six women were being refurbished with their names, the committee members overseeing the renovation work also saw fit to add inscriptions with the names of the twelve Shiʿi Imams, much to the consternation of some members of the Sunni majority that comprises the devotees who visit the shrine. On 27 July 1971, sectarian strife broke out between the two over the inscription of the names of the four Rashidun caliphs (Abu Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthman, and ʿAli) in one of the buildings in the shrine precinct. The invocation of the names of the Rashidun, with the exception of ʿAli, is an abomination for the Shiʿa who believe the first three caliphs were usurpers.

As tensions continued to rise, the Lahore Auqaf Department intervened in order to mediate the situation. Both Sunnis and Shiʿa referred to their religious history and claimed Ruqayyah as their own. For the Sunni community, Bibi Pak Daman was a Sufi shrine; for the Shiʿa, the space was a site of cultural memory. Unable

to resolve the conflict, a series of compromises were proposed, including: 1) no male be allowed to enter the tomb precinct of Bibi Pak Daman; 2) no meetings can be held in the shrine; 3) no sectarian call to prayer (*azan*) can be made; 4) no signboards may be put up in the shrine, and 5) nothing can be said or done to injure the religious sentiments of any particular religious group (Kalra and Ibad 2019, 74). The final proposal reflects Chapter 15 of the Pakistan Penal Code regarding offenses relating to religion. Section 298 pertains to uttering words with the deliberate intent to injure religious feelings. While the intention behind such a provision in the Penal Code may be good, in practice, what causes harm or injury to religious feeling is highly subjective and open to abuse by the complainant in a legal case. The October meeting further amplified tensions between the two religious groups requiring a follow-up meeting and a new set of proposals to resolve the conflict. In March 1972, the following six proposals were presented: 1) socially respectable (*sharif*) men may enter into the grave precinct; 2) the shrine will be considered Sunni, although Shiʿa will be permitted to perform their rituals without interference; 3) the names of the Rashidun caliphs may be engraved in the Jalal al-Din Haidar shrine; 4) no meetings may take place in the shrine of Bibi Pak Daman; 5) certain types of meetings may take place in two locations only: in the mosque and in the shrine of Mai Tanur; and 6) no signboards may be put up in the shrine (for further discussion see Kalra and Ibad 2019, 74–75). Conflict between the Sunnis and Shiʿa enabled the state Auqaf Department to assume much of the management of the Bibi Pak Daman shrine, taking away the shrine's autonomous management of daily activities such as the distribution of free food (*langar*) to pilgrims and the management of large festivals (Kalra and Ibad 2019, 75).

Conclusion

Despite the recent emergence of competition and conflict between Sunnis and Shiʿa over the historical memory and management of the space of Bibi Pak Daman, we see how rituals, sacred spaces, and devotional objects enable diverse religious communities of devotees to seek the intercession of the Ahl-e Bait in

their petitions for success in marriage, the conception and birth of a child, and for the protection of their family. Bibi Pak Daman is a Sufi shrine for some and for the Shiʿa the space reflects their history and community. Yet for both, the place is rooted in deep traditions of ʿAlid devotion. It was at Bibi Pak Daman that the great Sufi ʿAli al-Hujwiri, more affectionately known as Data Ganj Bakhsh ("the Lavish Giver," d. ca. 1072), was known to have regularly prayed, reflecting the sacred status of the shrine by non-Shiʿa in the medieval period.

ʿAlid devotion has been a constitutive element in the formation of South Asian Ganga-Yamuni culture (*tahzib*). Shiʿi material culture and Muharram ritual have played an important role in the religious calendars of Hindus and Sunnis throughout the subcontinent. In South Indian Telugu, Kannada, and Marathi poems about Hasan and Husain, the brothers are akin to the heroic kings of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Fatimah's suffering is shared with that of Sita from the *Ramayana* in the religious imagination and personal experiences of Hindu and Sunni village women who tell their stories. In village Muharram, Hindus and Sunnis weave together in a complex web, Sufi *pir* veneration, Indic votive rituals and epic narratives, and elements of Shiʿi rituals into to their own systems of devotion.

For Husaini Brahmins, an origin story that places the founder of their group at the battle of Karbala with Imam Husain and his family, where they also sacrificed their lives, is a source of community pride and an explanation for their caste-defying martial identity. Although the history of the Husaini Brahmins is somewhat murky with multiple origin narratives in circulation, the facticity of these narratives is not of paramount importance in considering their role in shaping South Asian everyday Shiʿism. In many regards, as we have seen in this chapter, ritual and material aspects of everyday South Asian Shiʿism transcend communal and sectarian boundaries and are shaped by multiple communities of devotion to the Ahl-e Bait.

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Theoretical Lessons

- As a heuristic model for the study of South Asian religions, syncretism is ahistorical and assumes a “pure” source tradition. A number of more productive, alternative models have been in circulation in the subcontinent since the sixteenth century to explain practices of religious and cultural convergence and cooperation in South Asia, including Ganga-Yamuni *tahzib*, tolerance (*rawadari*), and absolute civility (*sulh-e kull*).
- The ways that the Karbala event, the Imams, and Ahl-e Bait are rooted to the subcontinent through rituals, narratives, and the construction of spaces of ʿAlid devotion can be described as falling under the rubric of being “ambiguously Islamic” (Bellamy 2011, 113). They belong to no specific religious tradition, rather draw on subcontinental discourses, themes, and values that are understandable and meaningful to diverse religious communities.

Notes

1 In addition to the Datt, the six other clans that comprise the Mohyals are the Bhimwal, Chhibber, Lau, Mohan, Vaid, and Bali.

2 By some accounts, Imam Husain's head is buried in the ʿUmayyad Mosque in a tomb known as the Mashhad Ra's al-Husain, located close to the *mashhad* of John the Baptist, who also has a shrine dedicated to his head in the mosque.

3 Hagiographical accounts of Mukhtar's rebellion were first written in Persian in Iran in the Safavid period (r. 1501–1722); the story was later introduced in India and translated into Urdu and other local languages. Known collectively as *Mukhtar-namah*, these narratives are written in simple Urdu and depict

Mukhtar and his compatriots in the pro-ʿAlid rebellion as heroes in their epic battle of good against the evil the ʿUmayyad caliphate is made to represent.

4 For a history of *pirla panduga* and associated rituals for Kullyappa in Gugudu, see Mohammad 2013.

5 Note this is a Telugu adaptation of the Arabo-Persian term *niyyah*, used elsewhere in the book.

6 Pan-bira is a preparation of the astringent areca nut, which colors the mouth red when chewed, and slaked lime (chunam), mixed with aromatic spices such as clove and cardamom, which is wrapped in a betel leaf (pan). Pan-bira are often given as gifts of hospitality or as a sign of affection; significantly, they are also presented to confirm relationship, particularly at the time of a wedding engagement.

7 The Indic taboo against widow remarriage is in tension with the *sunnah* (lived tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad, who declared “marriage is my *sunnah*. He who does not act upon it shall not be mine.” Among Muslim nobility in India, there has been a sense of dishonor in widows remarrying, indicating the diminution of orthodox law to local customary practice, particularly in the domain of “personal law,” which pertains to issues of marriage, divorce, and inheritance (for further discussion see Ruffle 2011, 140–142).

8 *Dulha* or bridegroom, here representing Qasem.

9 Known by this unusual spelling of his name, the editors of the most recent edition of Jaffur Shurreef's *Islam in India* have elected to transliterate our nineteenth-century author's name following more conventional scholarly methods, rendering it Jaʿfar Sharif. For the sake of clarity, I refer to this author as Jaffur Shurreef.

10 Ruqayyah was ʿAbbas's sister and Husain's half-sister.

11 *Waqf* (pl. *awqaf*) is a charitable endowment of various types of assets (land, buildings, or money) that is given in the form of an inalienable gift to Muslim

religious, educational, and medical institutions. Such endowments are bestowed in perpetuity and cannot be revoked through sale, inheritance, or other means of transfer. A *waqf* is comprised of three contractual parties: (1) the *waqif* or donor who establishes the charitable endowment, (2) the *mawquf ʿalayh*, who is responsible for ownership of the property, and (3) the *mutawwali*, who is responsible for the administration of the property and discharging all terms of the *waqif's* endowment (for further discussion see Abbasi 2012, 124).

2

"Come, and Cry, Because ʿ*Ashura* Is Today": Shiʿi Literary Aesthetics

The events of Karbala have long captured the imagination of South Asian Shiʿi writers and poets, who have composed poems in various styles from the epic *marsiyah* to the rhythmic *nauhah* to which self-flagellation is performed, to the *soz* accompanied by the melodic structures and tunes of the *raga*. There are many reasons why the events and heroes of Karbala have appealed to South Asian writers across sectarian and religious boundaries. From the seventeenth century, writers in the Deccan region of South India invoked Karbala imagery to lament the destruction of Hyderabad and the Shiʿi Qutb Shahi dynasty by the vastly larger military forces of the Sunni Mughal dynasty led by emperor ʿAurangzeb (Hyder 2006, 166), a veritable Yazid in the historical imagination of many. Karbala has been held up by South Asian writers, whether Shiʿa, Sunni, or Hindu, as a powerful symbol of truth and resistance against oppression. Karbala has also been taken up in the twentieth century by short story writers, novelists, and playwrights, whose use of Karbala symbolism and the shocking violence of Husain's death corresponded to the cataclysm of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan.

Writers have used Karbala symbolism and the example of Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait in their poetry to convey Shiʿi ethical and religious messages. The short, rhyming *nauhah* poem is composed using accessible language and imagery, often with the goal of invoking tears and physical grief from Shiʿa through vignettes focusing on singular incidents during or in the aftermath of the battle of Karbala. These are often presented from the voice and emotional perspective of the women of the Ahl-e Bait, particularly Imam Husain's sister Zainab and his daughters Fatimah Kubra or Sakinah. A second type of *nauhah* engages non-mourning themes of prayer, politics, the sectarian superiority of Shiʿism and Karbala, and instruction in moral and ethical self-improvement. This type of *nauhah* encourages Shiʿa to ponder the ultimate truth of Karbala and the idealized model for humanity that Imam Husain presents; such *nauhahs* are not intended to produce tears, but to reinforce loyalty to the Ahl-e Bait and to the faith.

This chapter takes a particular focus on the role of the feminine voice and emotions in Shiʿi devotional literature. *Rekhti*, a genre of Urdu poetry in which male authors speak and imagine themselves as women, is a specifically Indic literary form. By inhabiting feminine voices and emotions, men are able to express feelings of vulnerability and fear, typically gender-coded as un-masculine. Assuming the feminine voices of Zainab, Sakinah, and Fatimah Kubra brings the listener into the immediacy of Karbala, where the tragic martyrdom of the young boys ʿAun and Muhammad, the bridegroom Qasem, or the loving uncle ʿAbbas feels as real as losing a member of one's own family.

In this chapter, I take another somewhat unexpected approach to Shiʿi devotional literature. In spite of its beauty and the significant contribution it has made to Shiʿi religious culture and aesthetics in South Asia, I have elected not to focus on the epic *marsiyah*, although I engage with the genre to some extent in Chapters 1 and 5. Compared to other genres of Shiʿi devotional literature, the *marsiyah* has been by far the most studied by North American, European, and South Asian scholars (Bard 2002; Hyder 2006). By contrast, the *nauhah* has received scant attention except in passing, and most often in relation to Muharram self-

flagellation (*matam*) rituals (Pinault 1992; Ruffle 2015). I also devote considerable focus to miracle stories here and in Chapter 6, focusing on vow-making and festive occasions. *Muʿjizat kahanis* have an important place in domestic ritual and in women's everyday religious practice (Bard 2015). Telling these stories provides opportunities for supplicatory vow-making and religious lessons, affords a necessary outlet for women to give voice to troubles they experience in their life, and offers a means by which they can establish reciprocal bonds with the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. Rich stores of literary and mystically inflected metaphors drawn from Sufism, as well as from Indic theories of emotion, aesthetics, and musicality have shaped the affective and aesthetic dimensions of South Asian Shiʿi devotional literature. While I do not discuss the influence of Indic theories of aesthetics (*rasa*) and emotion (*bhava*), I do think it is important to mention their interplay with the composition of certain genres of South Asian Shiʿi literature, particularly the musically inflected *soz* and the epical *marsiyah*.

Tears of a Horse: Sufi Metaphors in Shiʿi Devotional Narratives of Birds and Horses

Sufism and devotion to the Ahl-e Bait have long been intertwined, with most Sufi orders tracing their lineage (*silsilah*) back to Imam ʿAli as their model for spiritual practice and source of legitimation. Most Indian Sufis have similarly venerated Imam Husain and have exalted his martyrdom as the consummate spiritual model for annihilation of the egotistical self in God (*fanaʾ fiʾllah*). South Asian Chishti Sufis have compared Imam Husain to Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922), who was martyred in tenth-century Baghdad for his declaration, "I am the truth" (*ana al-haqq*). Local Baghdadi authorities took umbrage at what they perceived to be al-Hallaj's blasphemous usurpation of God's name, al-Haqq, meaning the Truth. Like Imam Husain, al-Hallaj was martyred for his self-annihilating love of God. Two couplets attributed to the spiritual master Muʿinuddin Chishti (d. 1236) draw the connection between Imam Husain and al-Hallaj, and how their piety and love brought about their death:

Husain is the king, Husain is the sovereign

Husain is the religion, Husain is the refuge of religion.

He gave his head, not his hands, to Yazid

Verily, Husain is the foundation of “There is no god.”

(Hyder 2006, 105)

This poem of praise remains popular throughout South Asia today and can be found written in calligraphic bands in ʿ*ashurkhanahs* and *imambaras* (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of Shiʿi religious architecture and built space). The Shiʿa and the majority of Sufis venerate Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait as idealized lovers (*muhibb* or ʿ*ashiq*) of God. As devotees, they are also known as “lovers” (*mahabban*) of the Ahl-e Bait.

South Asian devotional literature, both prose and poetry, integrate Sufi metaphors and imagery with Karbala themes and stories about the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. The nightingale (*bulbul*) and the rose (*gul*), a Sufi metaphor of the spiritual lover and beloved was adapted in Shiʿi literature to Imam Husain’s martyrdom. The messengers of martyrdom and the consummate devotees of Husain and the family of the Prophet Muhammad are variously a white dove or the Imam’s loyal horse, Zuljanah. *Rowzat-e shohada* (The garden of the martyrs), Mullah Husain Vaʿez Kashefi’s Persian-language hagiography of the Imams and the battle of Karbala, was written in Herat, Afghanistan in 1502. It became the source text for South Asian devotional literature within a little more than a century of its composition. Kashefi’s engaging writing style and his ability to make Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait’s struggles on the Karbala battlefield real and immediate continues to have tremendous appeal. Writers translated *Rowzat-e shohada* into Indian vernacular languages and transformed the Arab context of seventh-century Karbala into South Asian cultural and social worlds, dressing the Ahl-e Bait in Indian clothing and making them consummate practitioners of localized rituals. Echoes of the Sufi-inflected ʿAlid devotion of *Rowzat-e shohada* can be traced in much of Shiʿi devotional literature. From the story of the dove of Karbala and the metaphor of the rose and the nightingale in *Rowzat-e*

shohada, we trace how Urdu poets have adapted this imagery in *nauhah* and other types of mourning poetry through the image of Husain's horse Zuljanah, as well as the use of Sufi metaphors to invoke grief for the Karbala martyrs.

It was not only humans who responded to the calamitous events at Karbala; at the moment of Husain's martyrdom, the universe quaked, God's throne (ʿ*arsh*) shook in its place, and the sky wept blood in grief for what had befallen the Imam and his family (Kashefi 1979, 358). The beings of the earth similarly responded: fish lamented, and birds cried. In *Rowzat-e shohada*, Kashefi describes the anguish of a white pigeon, transformed into the non-human messenger of Imam Husain's martyrdom to the residents of Medina.

> The birds took up the cry, and suddenly, a white dove landed and having wallowed in Imam Husain's blood (may God's peace and blessing be upon him), reddened its wings and feathers and flew away. It flew the great distance toward Medina, where it circled the tomb of the Prophet (may God's peace and blessings be upon him). Blood dripped from its feathers and the people of Medina were astonished at the sight. They struggled to understand, and after a few days, news of what happened to Imam Husain arrived. They realized that the bird had come as the "letter" announcing the martyrs of Karbala. The dove came with its wings and feathers tied together [in supplication and respect] in making the announcement over the mausoleum of the Lord of Humanity [the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad].
>
> *If I write of my condition for the bird to carry in a letter,*
>
> *The news it carries will burn up its feathers and wings.*
>
> Source: Translated from Husain Vaʿez Kashefi, *Rowzat-e shohada*, ed. Abu al-Hasan Shaʿrani (Tehran: Kitab Forushi-ye Islamiyya, 1979), 389.

In the hagiographical literatures narrating the events of Karbala, birds occupy a central and dramatic role in representing the cosmic reaction to Imam Husain's martyrdom, which finds expression in Indo-Persian literary and material cultural forms. Our sixteenth-century author, Vaʿez Kashefi, draws on the paired Sufi

image of the rose (*gul*) and the nightingale (*bulbul*). The Sufi metaphor of the rose and the nightingale operates on several levels in this passage in which they are adapted to convey a Shiʿi message of martyrdom. First, the rose in the Indo-Persian Sufi *ghazal* represents the beloved (*maʿshuq*) that is faithfully protected and looked after by the nightingale (the lover, *ʿashiq*) who gazes lovingly on its beauty. The dove is the veritable lover, who, because of the cruelty of fate, is unable to protect the beloved Imam Husain (the bloodied rose) from martyrdom. In Kashefi's Karbala narrative, the nightingale and the dove perform similar roles. The dove is the loyal lover (*ʿashiq*) of Imam Husain, who dips its wings in the beloved's red blood, and whose message of the Imam's martyrdom is analogous to the mournful song that the nightingale (*bulbul*) sings in longing for union with the beloved. Following the battle of Karbala, this poem of longing becomes a soul-scorching tune of lament.

In the second elaboration of the rose and nightingale metaphor, the dove delivers the tragic message of Husain's martyrdom to the residents of Medina. Flying over the Prophet Muhammad's grave, the dove folded up its wings and blood mysteriously dripped from the sky to the astonishment of Medina's residents, who could not understand the meaning of this wondrous sign. Yet, this event invokes a verse from the Qurʾan in which God exhorts: "Do they not observe the birds above them, spreading their wings and folding them in? None can uphold them except (Allah) Most Gracious: Truly it is He that watches over all things" (67:19). Birds are a symbol of God's creation with their seemingly miraculous ability to fly through the air – a sign of God's power for those who understand. As the dove flies over the Prophet's tomb in Medina, its wings are folded together, which we might interpret as both a sign of respect and supplication to the grandfather of Imam Husain. In this instance, we have a doubling of the *gul* and *bulbul* metaphor. The dripping blood remains a symbol of the beloved Husain, although now in relation to his grandfather Muhammad whose remains are entombed in Medina. In the mystical writings of the twelfth-century Persian Sufi Ruzbihan Baqli, the bird symbolizes the entrapment of the soul in its bodily cage (Ernst 1999, 362–365). The avian imagery is symbolically doubled so that

Muhammad, enshrined in his tomb, becomes the lover-nightingale, who, because of the cruelty of fate, is unable to protect his beloved grandson Imam Husain (the bloodied rose) from martyrdom. Heightening the tragedy of Husain's martyrdom is the fact that the Prophet Muhammad lies dead in his tomb and unable to protect his grandson from Yazid's violent act of political aggression. Kashefi's nightingale and rose metaphor is powerfully captured in the nineteenth-century *salam* of Mir Anis, the master poet of Shiʿi Lucknow:

The rose that the nightingale once protected even from the wind

Now endures the cruelty of autumn

In order to lighten the load of the grandfather's community,

He [Husain] pulls a heavy burden in old age.

(Mir Anis 1981, 105–107; quoted in Hyder 2006, 25)

The white dove of Karbala with its bloodied wings and grief-inducing message finds material expression in South Asian Shiʿism in devotional posters and in Muharram ritual. The dove is often paired with Imam Husain's white horse, Zuljanah (discussed above and in Chapters 4 and 5). Sometimes two pigeons are carried atop coffin replicas (*tabut*) to symbolize Imam Husain's martyrdom, which is a customary practice in Lucknow.

The symbolic connection between the dove at Karbala and Zuljanah as messengers of Imam Husain's martyrdom and loyal lovers of the Ahl-e Bait is an important theme in Urdu *nauhah* poetry. Zuljanah is described as "the winged one," which may conjure the image of the Karbala dove, although the *nauhah* I quote below makes another more explicit parallel, calling Zuljanah the "Buraq of Karbala." The Buraq was the Prophet Muhammad's fantastical mount, with the body of a donkey, beautiful female head, and spectacular peacock tail, that carried him on his night journey through the seven heavens, known as the *miʿraj* (see Chapters 3 and 4). More subtly, the Sufi metaphor of the rose and nightingale from Kashefi's *Rowzat-e shohada* is invoked by the poet in this image. This Urdu *nauhah* about Zuljanah is written by a Pakistani poet under the

pen-name “Javeed,” in which he weaves together complex hagiographical and religious themes:

When the Winged One, Zuljenah, returned riderless

From the battlefield to the tents,

Every weeping eye looked about for the master.

At the final hour the horse took this message from the battlefield:

“The Umma, the members of Husain’s own faith,

have thrown down and trampled on the living image of the Prophet!”

It rubs on its own forehead

this blood of the Martyr of Sorrow

and cries out in anguish: “O Lord of the Two Worlds!”

The whole body of this mute creature

is wounded by arrows.

Against him, too, the tyrants have directed their violent impulse.

(Quoted in Pinault 2001, 126)

Zuljanah, the loyal steed of Karbala, is the consummate animal lover (the *ʿashiq*) of Imam Husain in the Urdu *nauhah*. Zuljanah loves Husain and loyally protects him, and the task of spreading the message of the Imam’s martyrdom falls to the horse in the immediate aftermath of the battle. Because he is unable to speak, Zuljanah rubs his head in Imam Husain’s blood in order to “tell” the women in the encampment (*khaimah-gah*) what has happened on the battlefield. As the mute messenger of martyrdom, the tragedy of Husain’s martyrdom is heightened by the message Zuljanah brings, that the Imam – the “living image” of the Prophet Muhammad – has been killed. This echoes the dove flying over Muhammad’s tomb in Medina, reminding devotees of the exceptionally close relationship the Prophet shared with his grandson. Both the dove and Zuljanah are animals unable to speak human language, yet in Shiʿi devotional literature

their mute voices powerfully convey the message of Imam Husain's martyrdom and the spiritual importance of love and loyalty to the Ahl-e Bait.

The Female Voice and the Development of Shiʿi Devotional Literature

Shiʿi devotional literature, including *marsiyah*, *nauhah*, *soz* and *salam* poetry, as well as short stories, novels, and the discourses of the *majlis* mourning assembly are transportational, drawing the devotee into the world of Karbala and into the presence of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. This literature also has an important didactic function, instilling in South Asian Shiʿi cultural memory of the events of Karbala, and cultivating love and loyalty for the family of the Prophet Muhammad. In its performative context, Shiʿi devotional literature eliminate time and place; South Asia is Karbala, and any moment can be ʿ*ashura*. Shiʿi poetry such as the *marsiyah* and *nauhah* transport devotees across time and space, and it is also experiential, drawing on Zainab's call to Muslims to remember what happened at Karbala in her role as the "messenger of martyrdom."

Early Sunni and Shiʿi sources (ninth-thirteenth centuries) report that following their humiliation and imprisonment in Damascus at the ʿUmayyad caliph's court, Zainab and the other surviving women of the Ahl-e Bait briefly returned to Karbala en route to Medina. According to tradition, it is said that Zainab gave an impassioned speech at Husain's graveside in which she extolled her brother's virtues and heaped curses on Yazid and those who killed the Karbala heroes. Zainab's speech stirred the crowd to tears to such an extent that even the ʿUmayyad soldiers wept for the suffering and humiliation that her family had endured at their instigation. It is also said that when Zainab and the other women were captured after the battle, she struck her head in anguish because of what had befallen Husain, causing blood to flow. Some attribute Zainab's action with being the first instance of bloody self-flagellation (*matam*)[1] being performed as an expression of grief for Imam Husain's martyrdom. Zainab's act of striking her

head is important in relation to the central place of feminine voices and emotions in South Asian Shiʿi devotional poetry.

The origins of Shiʿi devotional literature are found in the *marsiyah*, a pre-Islamic, Arabic oral tradition of lament in which women extolled the merits (*ritha*) of the deceased men of the tribe. Arabic *marsiyahs* were composed by women, and after Imam Husain's martyrdom, the central role of the female voice in this genre was further established by Zainab's very public actions memorializing and extolling Husain's *ritha*.

As a genre that speaks through feminine voices and emotions, the *marsiyah* draws on wellsprings of memories about the deceased, and it provides a socially acceptable outlet for women to publicly mourn the loss of male family members and spiritual leaders. By the sixteenth century under the patronage of the Shiʿi Safavids in Iran, the Persian-language *marsiyah* evolved to focus almost exclusively on Imam Husain's martyrdom. The events of Karbala continued to be largely narrated through the voices and emotions of the women protagonists of the Ahl-e Bait (for further discussion, see Ruffle 2011a, 100–103). As Shiʿism spread and was established in South Asia, the composition of Shiʿi devotional literature in vernacular languages such as Urdu, Sindhi, Awadhi, and Panjabi continued to revolve around female voices and emotions. The feminine voice is often used to push the emotional climax of a poem, causing devotees to weep and to perform *matam* (see Chapter 5).

Feminine voices and emotions of the women of the Ahl-e Bait, particularly Zainab, Husain's youngest daughter Sakinah, and his daughter Fatimah Kubra – married and widowed on the Karbala battlefield – are recurrent in the short, episodic *nauhah*, as well as the longer epic *marsiyah*.

A Solace for the Heart, a Source of Religious Guidance: Multiple Perspectives on the *Nauhah*

A *nauhah* is a short rhythmic poem to which Shiʿa perform *matam* at the end of the mourning assembly and during Muharram processions. *Nauhah* are written in

simple language using expressive imagery that is intended to provoke emotional responses from its listeners. *Nauhah* fall into three broad thematic categories, which also adds to their appeal for Shiʿi men and women. In the first category, *nauhah* take as their subjects individual heroes and vignettes from the battle of Karbala, dwelling on moments of heroic valor or heartbreaking sadness, such as when Sakinah realizes her uncle ʿAbbas has died while collecting water for her at the Euphrates River. Other *nauhah* focus on particular moments from the battle of Karbala, placing less emphasis on individual figures. *Nauhah* in these first two categories are intended to instill grief, causing one to weep and strike themselves in grief. The third thematic category of the *nauhah* is divergent in its engagement with non-mourning themes, which may focus on ethics, religious instruction, sectarian issues, or even politics.

During the *majlis*, the orator's narrative of the Karbala tragedy (*masaʾib*) causes men and women to strike the chest, head and thighs with the hands in spontaneous outpourings of emotion. The *majlis* orator's (*zakir*) description of the sufferings of Imam Husain and his family at Karbala builds toward an emotional crescendo that continues when a reciter of *nauhah* poems, called a *nauhah-khwan*, stands, either alone or with a small group of vocal accompanists who chant the refrain, to bring the mourning assembly participants to the climax of their grief. Modulating his or her voice, adjusting the tempo of the *nauhah*, or integrating the poet's voice into the poem to form a dialogue with one of the Karbala poems and speak for the broader Shiʿi community, the *nauhah-khwan* expresses sentiments of love, loyalty, and grief for the Ahl-e Bait, all of which amplify the connection between the content of the poem and the performance of *matam*. Islamic studies scholar David Pinault explicitly links *nauhah* and *matam* together: "*Nauha* and *matam* comprise a unit; participants select a style of *matam* which can easily be performed in time to the *nauha*-chant" (1992, 111). Certainly, *nauhahs* are recited to produce the intended emotional response of physical grief in the forms of tears (*giryan*), striking the body with hands (*hath ka matam*), and flagellating oneself with knives and other instruments (*zanjir ka matam*). The hyper-visibility of *matam* during Muharram processions with the

accompanying chanting of the *nauhah* has led observers to assume that these two forms are mutually dependent on each other. Yet I have sat in many mourning assemblies and observed women and men strike themselves in grief while listening to a *zakir* describe ʿAbbas's or ʿAli Akbar's martyrdom; performing *matam* need not be dependent on the recitation of *nauhah*.

The purpose of the *nauhah* is to produce different emotional responses for Shiʿi listeners. There is an unabashed emotionality to the *nauhah* that has placed it in negative regard in comparison to the more epic *marsiyah*, with its formal literary style and use of highly Persianized vocabulary and idioms. European and North American scholars have largely ignored or written only in passing about the *nauhah* in studies of Muharram and Shiʿi devotional literature, I think, because of its accessible language and the strong emotional responses this poetic genre is intended to elicit in its recitation, which has relegated the genre to the domain of the "popular." It is precisely because the *nauhah* generates spontaneous outbursts of tears and striking of the body caused by the intense intimacy the poems create that this poetic genre has been marginalized in academic and religious reformist discourse. Everyday Shiʿism is shaped by emotional practices that bridge cultural memory and present-day individual and collective lived experiences of Shiʿa in South Asia, and the *nauhah* is a lens through which to view these worlds and values.

In this section we examine two *nauhahs*. In the first, Zainab mourns her two sons, ʿAun and Muhammad, aged ten and nine, when they were martyred on the Karbala battlefield. In the second, the superiority of Karbala is vaunted over the Kaʿba. The first *nauhah* incites the performance of *matam*, whereas the second is explicitly normative in tone, using the language of prayer to remind and explain to Shiʿa why their faith is superior. This *nauhah* is not intended to produce tears or *matam*, rather its content should cause reflection and encourage moral and ethical self-improvement.

‘Why not Beat My Head in Lamentation?’: Gender and Voice in the *Nauhah*

Crying out in sadness and with the anger caused by the pain inflicted on a mother’s tormented heart, Zainab mourns the martyrdom of her two sons, ʿAun and Muhammad. As scions of the Ahl-e Bait, they fought bravely on the Karbala battlefield, and were such skilled swordsmen that they drew the attention of the ʿUmayyad general ʿUmar ibn Saʿd. This *nauhah* was written by a well-known Hyderabadi Shiʿi poet using the pen-name (*takhallus*) “Baqir.” In this *nauhah*, the refrain, “O Aoun, O Muhammad!” recurs eighteen times.[2]

Wept the mother over her dead sons,	“O Aoun, O Muhammad!”
Alas, I offer myself to save you	O Aoun, O Muhammad!
You departed this world without wedding garlands	O Aoun, O Muhammad!
I longed to see you wed, then live in peace	O Aoun, O Muhammad!
But in the face of Fate my hands were tied	O Aoun, O Muhammad!
In place of two grooms [now] lie two corpses	
Let me be taken instead of you	
With what eyes can I look at you in this state	O Aoun, O Muhammad!
In front of me, a mother, lie your corpses	
How can I console my heart?	
Why not beat my head in lamentation	O Aoun, O Muhammad!
You lived up to your uncles’ ideals	
But darlings, tell me this –	
Was your mother not worthy of your love,	
too,	O Aoun, O Muhammad!
This was the mother’s lament, Baqir,	
Over her sons’ corpses –	
“Let me be taken instead of you!”	

Source: Syed Akbar Hyder and Carla Petievich, “Shiʿi Mourning in Muharram: *Nauha* Laments for Children Killed at Karbala,” in *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 117.

In this *nauhah*, the poet “Baqir” speaks in Zainab’s voice as she mourns the battlefield deaths of her young sons ʿAun and Muhammad. Zainab cries out, “How can I console my heart? Why not beat my head in lamentation, O Aoun, O

Muhammad!" By speaking such words of grief, while also rhetorically asking, "Why not beat my head in lamentation?" Zainab performs multiple acts of tragic foreshadowing. The listener knows that Zainab is the messenger of Imam Husain's martyrdom, who struck her head with such grief it caused her to bleed. The listener also knows it was Zainab's testimony that spread the news to the Muslim community of what happened at Karbala. The listener cries for Zainab, who is also a mother whose young sons are taken from her while far too young. This is dramatically amplified when Zainab tells the listener what is denied to ʿAun and Muhammad in their martyrdom, namely the honor they will bring to the family through marriage, particularly in South Asian Shiʿi culture where marriage is a social and familial requirement for upholding status and honor.

Rather than two bridegrooms in the bloom of youth, Zainab is left with two corpses, which is a variation of another similar theme we see in the miracle story (*muʿjizah kahani*) of Fatimah al-Zahra later in this chapter in which the wedding chamber ("house of joy," or *shadi-khanah*) is suddenly transformed into a funeral hall (*gham-khanah*, "house of sorrow"). Weddings, funerals, bridegrooms, and corpses are popular oppositional images that are invoked in Shiʿi devotional literature. The juxtaposition of a wedding, which is a joyful and future-oriented celebration, with the near-certain annihilation of Imam Husain and his male supporters at Karbala is jarring; the battlefield wedding of Qasem to Fatimah Kubra or the young boys of the Ahl-e Bait going forth valiantly to fight the grown men in Yazid's significantly outsized army seems to be a cruel trick of Fate (*qismat*). On the other hand, through "Baqir's" *nauhah*, Zainab speaks proudly of her sons, exclaiming, "You lived up to your uncles' [Husain and ʿAbbas] ideals." Female voices and emotions such as that of Zainab or Sakinah amplify the extraordinary circumstances of Karbala and make even more real for the listener the sacrifices and deaths of Imam Husain and their other family members. Listening to a *nauhah* and weeping and/or performing *matam*, one feels an intimate and familial connection with ʿAbbas, Qasem, ʿAun and Muhammad, who through repeated narration of their stories in poetry and *majlis*

discourse become part of a Shiʿa's fictive kin network (see Ruffle 2015, 188–192 for further discussion).

'Karbala: Come to the Best of Deeds': The *Nauhah*and Normative Discourse

Not all *nauhahs* use the female voice or are intended to produce emotional effects of mourning, or *matamdari*, such as weeping and self-flagellation. These non-mourning *nauhahs* focus on historical, sectarian, theological, ethical, and political themes. The Pakistani poet Rehan Aʿzmi (d. 2021) was a prolific writer of Urdu *nauhahs* (Jafri 2018). His poetry addresses a broad range of themes, although he was perhaps most notable for the non-mourning *nauhahs* that he wrote, which are extensive, focusing on ʿAli's Imamate, the doctrine of the messianic return of the twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, and the pivotal relationship between the Qurʾan, prayer, Imam Husain and his model at Karbala:

> The question is of the call to prayer, the response is that of namaz
>
> Witness to this speech, is a book like the Qurʾan
>
> The caretaker of worship is only Husain.
>
> (Aʿzmi quoted in Jafri 2018, 41)

Aʿzmi's *nauhah* is fascinating in the way it guides the listener to action. The call to prayer (*azan*) is devoid of meaning unless a Shiʿa "responds" by performing *namaz*, or prayer. The Qurʾan is the witness of God's speech or revelation to humanity; it is the receptacle of those divine words and commands. The culmination of the *nauhah* is with Imam Husain who is the embodiment of prayer and the qurʾanic message.

The Hyderabadi poet Janab Rashid Shahidi's *nauhah*, "Karbala: come to the best of deeds" is a dense, layered poem exalting the superiority of Shiʿism. Shahidi's *nauhah* is rich with prayer imagery, including a play on the line from the Shiʿi call to prayer, "make haste to the best of deeds" (*hayya ʿala khair al-ʿamal*). Like

the divine truths hidden in the Qurʾan, Karbala is the true reality, the ethical “key that unlocks the Qurʾan.”

Karbala achieved the preservation of Muhammad’s religion

Karbala is where the prophets prostrated themselves in prayer.

In the dust storm of tyranny is the search for truth.

Truth performs with its wounds the ablution for prayer.

Behold the intimate speech between God and the servants of patience.

Until Judgment Day the voice of truth is Karbala.

Karbala achieved the preservation of Muhammad’s religion.

Karbala is the record of the blood shed in thirst.

Karbala is the key that unlocks the Qurʾan.

Karbala is the destiny of Islam.

Karbala achieved the preservation of Muhammad’s religion…

When the land of the Kaaba became boastful

suddenly a voice came forth from the celestial Throne:

“Where is there within your borders such auspicious dust of healing?

Above you Karbala is exalted in rank!”

Karbala achieved the preservation of Muhammad’s religion.

In what realm can the like of this dust be found?

In the land of thirst is the palace of tears.

Karbala: come to the best of deeds.

Karbala is the furthest limit of divine solitude.

Karbala achieved the preservation of Muhammad’s religion…

They have set fire to Sakina’s garments.

Again and again she was scourged by Shemr.

Burning wounds increased the thirst.

Karbala is the miracle of thirst.

Karbala achieved the preservation of Muhammad's religion.

(Janab Rashid Shahidi, quoted in Pinault 2001, 44–45)

Shahidi's *nauhah* is distinctly sectarian, participating in a normative discourse that asserts the superiority of Shiʿism, which is coded by his references to Karbala, both the battlefield and the site of Imam Husain's shrine-tomb, in nearly every line of the poem. The refrain, "Karbala achieved the preservation of Muhammad's religion" refers to the necessity of Muhammad's grandson's martyrdom in order to preserve the integrity of the prophetic message. Muhammad's religion was contained in the scriptural revelation of the Qurʾan, embodied in his lived example in the *sunnah*, and exemplified and continued through the Imams and Ahl-e Bait.

The miraculous qualities and sanctity of Karbala's dust are extolled in this *nauhah*. Shahidi draws on a long tradition of *hadiths* and Shiʿi texts attesting to the importance of venerating the soil around Imam Husain's shrine-tomb as well as its exalted status over the Kaʿba, the house of God on earth, toward which all Muslims pray daily. Even the invocation of the miraculous qualities of Karbala's soil participates in a normativizing discourse in this *nauhah*. Shahidi's implied intertextual referencing of Shiʿi authoritative sources produces in the listener Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *doxa,* the "collection of bodily rhythms and dispositions that come to be taken for granted by members of a community as an established cosmological order, perceived not as arbitrary (i.e. as one among others) but as a self-evident natural order recurrently reproduced without any questioning or second-guessing" (Bourdieu 1990, 55; quoted in Tareen 2020, 185). Karbala establishes a cosmological, ethical order in the lives of Shiʿa that is self-evident in the miracles it produces from the soil on which Imam Husain sacrificed his life.

Ibn Qulawayh, the tenth-century Iraqi traditionalist (d. ca. 978) wrote *Kamil al-ziyarat* (The perfection of the visitations) to guide medieval Shiʿi pilgrims in the etiquette of visiting Imam Husain's shrine-tomb in Karbala. Five of the 108

chapters are dedicated to Karbala's sacred soil, how to collect it, what prayers to recite, and how it should be consumed. Shahidi refers to a tradition from *Kamil al-ziyarat*, an act of inter-textuality with which all Shiʿa will be familiar, in which the sixth Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, speaking polemically, virtually condemns the Kaʿba for not understanding its subordinate status to Karbala:

> Imam Sadiq (a.s.) said: The land of the Kaʿaba once said in pride, "Who is like me, Allah has built His house on me, people from far come to me and I have been chosen as Allah's sanctuary?"
>
> Allah revealed to it: "Keep quiet and calm down! I swear by My Glory and Magnificence that your honor compared to the honor which I have granted to the land of Kerbala is like a drop of water on a needle dipped in the sea.
>
> If it was not for the dust of Kerbala, I would not have honored you. If it was not for that which is held within the land of Kerbala, I would not have created you nor would I have created the house about which you boasted.
>
> Therefore, settle down, calm down and become humbled, lowly, humiliated, disgraced and degraded before the land of Kerbala. Do not be proud or arrogant before it or I will make you sink and throw you in Hellfires."
>
> (Ibn Qulawayh 2010, 288–289)

Shahidi writes, "In what realm can the like of this dust be found?" The answer to this question, every Shiʿa knows, is that only in Karbala can one find soil and water endowed with such sacred and curative powers that are blessed by God and made potent through Imam Husain's martyrdom. In another tradition from *Kamil al-ziyarat*, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq gives agency to the soil and water of Karbala, allowing it to speak: "I am the sacred and blessed land of Allah. Cure has been placed in my dust and water and I am not arrogant. Rather, I am humble and humiliated before He who has blessed me. I do not boast to those who are lower to me in rank. On the contrary, I am thankful to Allah" (Ibn Qulawayh 2010, 292).

Hearing the Miraculous: A Different Kind of Love Story

Sitting in living rooms, on the roof-top while trying to stay cool during hot summer nights, whiling away long afternoons, or during the first days of Muharram as the anticipation builds for the intense days from 6 Muharram and after, stories about miracles (pl. *muʿjizat*, sing. *muʿjizah*) performed by the Fourteen Infallibles (*chardah maʿsumin*)[3] abound in South Asian Shiʿism. These miracle stories construct an enchanted world in which the Imams and Ahl-e Bait are understood to be historical figures, yet it is their supernatural qualities that allow devotees to constantly be in contact with them and to seek their intercession. The world that the *muʿjizah kahani*, miracle story, constructs is one of devotion to and intimacy with the Imams and Ahl-e Bait.

Urdu miracle stories shape the daily, weekly, and festive period rhythms of life for South Asian Shiʿa. Told primarily in domestic spaces, the Imams and Ahl-e Bait portrayed in the *muʿjizah kahani* are accessible individuals available to intercede on behalf of loyal Shiʿa in times of trouble and need. These stories emphasize a sense of intimacy and love for these holy figures rather than inspiring awe by their spiritual transcendence. The act of listening to a *muʿjizah kahani* is what will garner religious merit (*sawab*), more so than telling or reading the story, which we shall see in the miracle story of Fatimah below. Oral recitation of miracle stories is usually connected to making a vow (*mannat*), either worldly or spiritual. A person states her intention by asking a favor of a particular Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait – popular figures are Imam ʿAli, Fatimah Zahra, and ʿAbbas – and then announcing which story will be recited. It is customary to also distribute sweets as part of the recitation of the *muʿjizah kahani*. The distribution of sweets prior to the fulfillment of the petitioner's supplication is based on both confidence and, more importantly, faith that the wish will be fulfilled.

There are certain features, tropes, and religious actions in *Janab-e sayyidah ki kahani* ("The Story of Lady Fatimah") and the other formal *muʿjizat kahanis* that conform to a subcontinental repertoire of vowing stories such as the *vrat katha*

(Bard 2015, 148; Schubel 1993, 38). The ritualized telling of *muʿjizah kahani* and *vrat katha* involve food offerings (Shiʿa) or fasting (Hindu) and the performance of special prayers and vows made in honor of the holy figure or god on whose behalf the story is being told.

A miracle story can be told at any time. Formal miracle stories such as *Janab-e sayyidah ki kahani*, *ʿAli mushkil-kusha* ("ʿAli, the Remover of Difficulties"), or *Muʿjizah-ye Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq* ("The Miracle of Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq"), which is referred to in South Asian studies scholarship as "The Woodcutter's Tale,"[4] are more structured in when and how they are told compared to the more informal miracle stories that individuals tell of "encounters" with Imams or members of the Ahl-e Bait experienced either by themselves, relatives, or friends (see Bard 2015, 138, 147). These "casual" miracle stories are extremely common and enter into conversation with great frequency. My first fieldwork experience in Islamabad and Lahore, Pakistan in 2000 introduced me to these casual miracle stories, which I found deeply moving. In some small way, these narratives and how they were told to me by my Pakistani hosts – sometimes sitting in a formal living room, other times riding on the back of a motorcycle on the way to a shrine, and others over a meal being served in a bedroom, which was the coolest room in the house because of its air conditioner – shifted my research interests from the Urdu *marsiyah* to the intersection of ritual practice and religious narratives in shaping everyday religious life. I wanted to hear more stories of people's miraculous encounters with the Imams and Ahl-e Bait whose stories are told with feelings of love for and familiarity with the family of the Prophet Muhammad. A story may be told to alleviate troubles or hardships being experienced by a person on whose behalf the story is told. Stories may also be told on specific days of the week, usually on Thursday night, which is also when mourning assemblies are held to ritually remember the sufferings of Imam Husain and his family at Karbala. A third context in which "formal" miracle stories are told is on 22 Rajab, a day dedicated to the sixth Imam, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, in a festive event known as *kunde ki niyaz* when sweets are shared by family and

friends. Rice pudding (*khir*) and wheat breads called *puri* that puff up when fried in oil are typically served (see Chapter 6).

Urdu miracle stories reflect South Asian, particularly North Indian and Pakistani, landscapes and social figures, and express cultural and gender values. Many of the characters come from non-elite, artisan castes. They are potters (*kumhar*), woodcutters (*khar-kash*), goldsmiths (*sunar*), servants (*naukar*), and horsemen (*sawar*) in royal courts. These stories are written in simple Urdu, making them easy to follow by diverse audiences. They are also readily available for purchase from small bookstores and stalls near shrines and *imambaras*. Although the miracle stories are sometimes anthologies sold in larger collected volumes, they are most commonly available for purchase as small, cheaply printed chapbooks containing a single miracle story, *ʿAli mushkil-kusha* ("ʿAli, the Remover of Difficulties"), for example. Scholar of Urdu Shiʿi literature, Amy Bard, notes that the "formal" type of miracle stories are stylistically similar to the medieval romance traditions of the Urdu *dastan*, Sufi *masnavi*, or Hindavi *katha* (genres of literary story-telling), populated with kings, ministers (*wazir*), princesses, and dramatic "quest" stories in which the heroine is lost and then found after much trial and tribulation (Bard 2015, 151). In what follows, I offer a translation of *Janab-e sayyidah ki kahani*.

The Story of Lady Fatimah (*Janab-e sayyidah ki kahani*)

The First Miracle (pahla muʿjizah)

There is a well-known story that in some Arab city, there lived a goldsmith's wife (*sunaran*) who had only one son. One day when the goldsmith's wife went to the well to fetch water, her son accompanied her. The goldsmith's wife sat her son down near the well and she set about fetching water. Off in the other direction, there lived a potter, whose kiln at that moment was well-stoked. The boy was playing and wandered off in the potter's direction. Finished drawing water, the goldsmith's wife did not see her son, so she thought he must have gone home. Returning home, the boy wasn't there either. Then the mother became distressed. Crying and beating her breast, she once again set out from the house to look for her darling boy. She went to the well and looked high and low. Distressed and upset, she went here and there, asking everyone if they had seen him, but no one knew anything. All of a sudden, there was a clamor that the son of the goldsmith's wife had fallen into the potter's kiln and has been burnt to a crisp. Hearing this she received a great shock and fainted.

And what did she see while in a state of unconsciousness but a majestic (*muʿazzam*) veiled woman approaching who declared, "Do not be sad. You will find your son again very soon. Make the vow, 'If my son jumps out of the fire safe and sound and his life is restored, then I will tell the story of Janab-e Sayyidah Fatimah (S.A.)." While still unconscious, the goldsmith's wife immediately vowed to do so. When she opened her eyes, the goldsmith's wife saw by God's favor (*fazl*) and kindness (*karam*), her son laughing and playing, and running toward her unharmed. By the miracle of Janab-e Fatimah, there was no trace of fire on his body. Even the clothes on his body were unmarked. *O God, Bless Muhammad and the Family of Muhammad*.

The goldsmith's wife took her son and joyfully went to the bazaar, where she purchased two coins (*paise*) worth of sweets and said to her neighbors, "My wish has been fulfilled. Come to my house and, if anyone remembers it, recite Janab-e Sayyidah Fatimah's (A.S.) story." She went to six houses but everyone said the same thing, "We do not remember the story, nor do we have the time for such foolish matters."

Thoroughly disappointed, the goldsmith's wife set out for the jungle. After having gone some distance she saw that noble veiled woman, who said, "Lady, do not cry! Spread out your veil, and please sit. I will tell you a story – listen."

Then she said, "In the city of Medina there once lived a Jew whose daughter was getting married. The Jew came before the Messenger of God (*salawat*)[5] and said, "My daughter is getting married. If you will give your permission to allow Fatimah to be a guest at my house, then my honor may increase."

The Prophet replied, "The master in charge of this matter is ʿAli."

Hearing this, he went to Hazrat ʿAli and asked him, "Please grant Fatimah permission to come to my house."

"The person in charge of making this decision is Fatimah, herself," ʿAli replied to the Jew.

At Fatimah's doorstep, the Jew called out, "Daughter of the Messenger of God! My daughter is getting married. If you will come, then my good name shall be increased."

Fatimah replied, "I will have to get permission from ʿAli, then I will come."

"I have already met with your father, the Messenger of God, and your husband, the Lion of God (*sher-e khuda*), and they both have authorized you to make the decision for yourself."

Hearing this, Fatimah was vexed. At this moment the Prophet came in and Fatimah cried out, "Father, a local Jew has come to invite me to his daughter's wedding. What do you recommend I do? Should I go or not?"

“Daughter, it is your choice.”

Fatimah humbly stated, “My dear father (*baba jan*), it would be a humiliation for you because the women will be adorned with sumptuous and refined clothing, while I have these coarse old clothes that I will have to patch up with date thorns.”

“Daughter, if it is what God wishes, then go even dressed like this,” counseled the Prophet.

So, [with a heavy heart] Fatimah prepared to go. She hadn’t even reached the porch of her house when the paradisiacal *houris*[6] descended from the heavens and adorned Fatimah in jewels and a robe, and they set off with Fatimah in a procession. Some *houris* were on her right, some were on her left; some went behind her and others in front. In such splendor, Fatimah’s cavalcade reached the Jew’s house. At the moment when she arrived at the Jew’s house, it was thoroughly illuminated by her divine light (*nur*), and a pleasing fragrance wafted throughout, which drifted over them all. Overwhelmed by Fatimah’s splendor and magnificence, all of the Jewish women fell unconscious. After a short while, the women roused, except the bride (*dulhan*) who remained unconscious. Countless plans were devised to bring her back, but to no avail. They saw and knew that her soul had already flown from its primordial cage. All at once, this nuptial chamber had turned into a house of mourning.

Seeing this, Fatimah was aggrieved, and she said, “Rest assured, she will regain consciousness.” Then she immediately performed two cycles of prayer (*rakʿat*) and with her hands raised up, she recited a supplicatory prayer (*duʿa*) to God:

“You named me the ‘Truthful’ (*siddiqah*), and You named me the Virgin (*batul*).[7] It is not a lie that I am the gift (*sadqah*) of the Messenger.”

> “O God! I am the daughter of Your Messenger. My honor is in Your hands. All these people here will say that as soon as Fatimah came, the bride died and this house of joy (*shadi*)[8] has turned into a house of grief (*gham*).”

Hardly any time passed before God answered Fatimah’s prayer. The bride sat up (*salawat*) and recited the profession of faith (*kalimah-ye shahadat*). She declared, “I bear witness (*shahadat dena*) there is one God without partners; that Hazrat Muhammad Mustafa is the true Messenger and that you are his daughter. Teach me the religion of Islam.” In this way, these women became sincere Muslims. Seeing Janab-e Fatimah Zahra’s miracle, five hundred Jewish men and women converted to Islam, and they all departed paying her the utmost reverence and honor. One woman gave her a maidservant. Fatimah returned home (*dawlat-khanah*) and narrated the entire event to her father. The Repository of Messengership (*risalat maʾb*) also thanked God.

In this manner, God, who on behalf of Janab-e Sayyidah (S.A.), fulfilled the wish of the goldsmith’s wife, will also fulfill the desires of all who listen to this story told on behalf of Muhammad and the Family of Muhammad.

Amin and *amin*.

The Second Miracle (dusra muʿjizah)

Once upon a time there was a king who lived in a city who loved to hunt. One day he told his minister (*wazir*) to prepare the hunting gear. The *wazir* organized the hunting party and equipment and let the king know when everything was ready. The king and *wazir* each had a daughter, and all set off for the hunt. Reaching the forest, they set up camp. Some members of the entourage collapsed with exhaustion, while others ate breakfast. Suddenly, a storm blew up with such force it pulled out large trees by the roots and tossed them about. No one could see anything in the storm, and neither the king nor his tent was to be seen. Once the storm died down some, people set out to look for the princess (*shahzadi*) and minister's daughter (*wazirzadi*) who went missing in the storm. The king and *wazir* were greatly distraught because of the deep fatherly love they had for their daughters.

They looked for a long time and could not find the girls. Ultimately, with heavy hearts they returned to the palace. Everyone in the palace was lamenting the missing girls, and all of the subjects in the kingdom also grieved the loss. Coincidentally, after the king's hunting party returned home, a king from the neighboring kingdom set out to hunt in the very same forest. Thirsty, the king ordered his *wazir* to gather water. The *wazir* went looking for water, and at the top of a mountain, he encountered two beautiful girls, who were the lost princess (*shahzadi*) and the *wazir's* daughter (*wazirzadi*).

When the girls had become separated from their fathers and the entourage, and then got lost on the top of the mountain, they became very upset. They were in trouble, and they cried so profoundly from the pain of separation from their families that they fell unconscious. While in this state of unconsciousness, they saw a veiled woman coming toward them. With great kindness, she said, "Girls, do not fear! Vow that when you again reunite with your fathers you will listen to the story of Bibi Fatimah."

The girls sincerely vowed that they would follow these instructions. Once they regained consciousness, the girls discussed what they dreamt while passed out; they affirmed that they would uphold their vow [*mannat*], and waited for God's mercy and grace.

At that moment, the *wazir* who had been searching for water for his king happened upon them. He was shocked to see these two forsaken girls sitting atop the mountain. He asked, "Girls, where do you live? Who is your family? How did you come to be here on this mountain?" With tears in their eyes, they told him the entire story of what happened, and they also informed the *wazir* of their family and rank. Aware now of the girls' status, the *wazir* went to his king and told him the story. The king was deeply moved and said to the *wazir*, "If the girls wish, have them come to me. Go, now, and bring them."

Following his king's command, the *wazir*, together with additional men and horses returned to the girls. The horses were left at the foot of the mountain, and he went up and requested, "Girls, please come with me." The girls agreed to go down the mountain with the *wazir*. He put them on the horses and brought them with great pomp to the king, after which they returned to the palace.

A royal emissary informed the first king that his daughter and the *wazir's* daughter were in the palace of the neighboring king. He sent gifts and a letter along with his *wazir* to the neighboring king. The letter made it clear that he wanted the two girls returned to him. Receiving the letter, the neighboring king replied: "Your girls are well and are being held by me in trust. It is my wish to give your daughter to my son in marriage and your minister's daughter to my *wazir's* son. It would be a joyful event that will increase our mutual affection."

The first king gave much thought and consideration, and then accepted the offer. The neighboring king returned both girls home. A date for the wedding was set, and both households set about making wedding preparations. Finally, the date arrived when the girls were to be married in accordance with

religious tradition. Then the brides left for the grooms' houses, during which time all of the items of the brides' dowry and trousseau had been loaded up, although the valuable water vessel [*lota*] from the wedding ceremony [*shadi*] was somehow forgotten. According to the tradition of that time, it was necessary for the bride to leave with the *lota*. As darkness fell, the wedding procession stopped in a protected place for the night. The *lota* could not be found and it was discovered that it had been left behind. The minister sent a horseman back to retrieve it.

When the horseman arrived back at the palace, what did he see? There was an empty field where the palace had once been. No throne, no crown, no king, no army – nothing! All that was left was the *lota* lying abandoned in the field. The horseman tried to grab it, but he could not because as he reached for it, from within the water vessel a poisonous snake extended its tongue and lashed out, attempting to bite the man. The horseman tried repeatedly to retrieve the pot, but the snake protected it. The *wazir* informed the king of what happened, whose initial surprise turned to fear. He went to the girls and said, "I know that you are witches or evil spirits sent in the form of women to perform black magic. I will imprison you and tomorrow I shall execute you." The king was filled with anger and outrage and returned to his tent, and the girls were imprisoned.

The girls were grief-stricken. They hugged and wept and said, "We don't understand what happened. Yesterday we were brides at our wedding; today we are in prison. Tomorrow, the lamps of our lives will be extinguished. We do not know what grievous sin we have committed, or for whose bad act we are being punished. God, please forgive us!"

They cried intensely and fell into a state of unconsciousness. While in this state, they again saw the veiled woman from their mountaintop vision. She came and said, "Girls, you made a vow on the mountaintop that once you reunited with your fathers you would hear the story of Janab-e Sayyidah Fatimah. You reunited with your family, yet you did not hear the story [*kahani*]. For this reason, these calamities have fallen on you. It is good that

these bad things have happened to you in this prison. God will make your troubles easy through Fatimah's intercession."

They asked, "How will we find the coin that we need to buy the sweets we need to hear the story? Who will bring them?"

The lady said, "Don't worry. You will find two coins in the hem of your clothing. You shall see someone going out from the back of the tent. He will bring the sweets from the bazaar nearby."

Then, the woman disappeared. The girls returned to consciousness and discussed what happened when they were passed out. The princess found the coins in the hem of her clothes, and they were happy. The next morning, an old man was coming out from the back of the tent. Seeing the girls, he asked them what they wanted, and he purchased two coins worth of sweets for them. The girls read the story and made a supplicatory prayer (*duʿa*), and then all of a sudden it was time for the executioner to make his appearance. He began to lead the girls to the execution ground, but the girls spoke as one, saying, "First, we should go to the king so he may speak with us."

The girls went before the king and asked if someone could not be sent to their homeland to see if things had not been fixed. If it was in the same condition, they were willing to be killed. The king sent his horseman, an honest man, to the girls' fathers' palace to investigate. The horseman saw that everything had been restored, and he was absolutely amazed. He returned and told everything to the king, who went to the girls and asked them, "What sort of magic are you performing? I am astonished. Stop this trickery."

The girls then told the king the whole story, about how they ended up on that mountaintop, had fallen unconscious from their fear and grief, and how they had made a vow to hear the story of Janab-e Sayyidah Fatimah when they were returned to their families, and how they had failed. They said, "Now that we have heard the story, this punishment has been lifted and we have been saved." The king believed their words and set the girls free. He restored their dignity and honor and the king headed home to his kingdom.

Conclusion

> Having told the story to the goldsmith's wife, the lady disappeared. The goldsmith's wife went home and behold what she saw! The houses of all those people who were too busy to hear the story were ablaze.

Through the intercession of Janab-e Sayyidah Fatimah, God fulfilled the goldsmith's wife's wish. In this manner, the Lord of Both Worlds will satisfy the heart's desires of the believers on behalf of the Family of Muhammad. *Amin* and *amin*.

Source: Translated from A.H. Rizvi, *Chardah muʿjize* [Fourteen miracles], (Karachi: Mahfuz Book Agency, 2003), 7–16.

"The Story of Lady Fatimah" is told in simple Urdu with an uncomplicated narrative structure. The *kahani* is comprised of a frame narrative and two nested tales that elaborate the rewards of telling the story of Sayyidah Fatimah and warns of the punishing torments that shall certainly befall those who neglect to do so. Each of the nested tales dramatically demonstrate to the listener what will happen if time is not made to hear the *kahani*, and if one does not believe in Fatimah's miraculous powers to heal and intercede in crisis situations. At the same time, this miracle story portrays Fatimah as a woman both impoverished and exalted. She is keenly aware of her poverty and of the ways in which the non-Muslims of Medina ridicule her family and their new religion, while at the same time she dazzles and overwhelms with heavenly jewels, robes, and the virginal retinue of *houris* that accompany her to the wedding of the Jewish merchant's daughter. Most importantly, Fatimah is portrayed as a woman of faith, steadfast in her devotion to God, for which she is rewarded.

Let us turn to the multilayered opening scenes of the first nested story, in which Fatimah despairs at having to attend a wedding where she will be laughed at for wearing an old patched cloak made of rough cloth. The listener feels sadness for the poverty that Fatimah endured, often going for days without food and wearing coarse clothing, trials she faced with equanimity. Feelings of tenderness are

generated when Fatimah implores her father Muhammad that her participation in such an ostentatious wedding would injure his dignity and bring shame on him. Knowing his daughter's concern for him, Muhammad tells Fatimah to have faith in God, which she does. God rewards Fatimah's faith, although His beneficence and compassion (*rahmat*) do spell trouble for the Jews who mock the Prophet Muhammad and Ahl-e Bait. It was their lack of faith (*iman*) that caused the bride to faint dead away, thus necessitating Fatimah's intercession by invoking her father's name and calling on God for His assistance.

It is this deeply dramatic moment in the narrative, in which structural inversion is employed as an effective narrative strategy for explaining why it is necessary to listen to *muʿjizat kahanis* and to believe in the powers of sacred figures like Fatimah, ʿAli, and Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. As Fatimah calls out in her prayer to God, it seems that Fatimah has brought chaos, tragedy, and even death to this seemingly joyful event in which the house of joy (*shadi*) was transformed into one of grief (*gham*), of marriage and death. Such inverted and oppositional images proliferate in Shiʿism, and the juxtaposition of marriage and death is collectively remembered by South Asian Shiʿa on 7 Muharram when Qasem and Fatimah Kubra's battlefield wedding is followed by the groom's martyrdom. Moments such as this are loaded with theological and symbolic meaning: Fatimah is the embodiment of her father's prophetic mission, and through her miracles she is the proof (*hujjat*) of God's existence and mercy.

In her 2004 English-language hagiography of Fatimah, Ghadeer Midhat, a Hyderabadi Shiʿa who devotes her time and money to writing books about the Ahl-e Bait, praises the virtue of spiritual rather than material wealth. Midhat's hagiographical account of Fatimah's life contain numerous normative discourses meant for her Shiʿi readers to integrate into their daily practice intended for "for the cultivation of moral excellence and virtue" (Tareen 2020, 183) In the lesson titled, "Material Wealth Is Less Important than Spiritual Wealth," Midhat writes,

> Spiritual wealth can be accumulated by doing good deeds. Good faith, good actions, charity, *sadaqa, khums* and *zakat*, etc. give you abundant wealth in the next world. When a person accumulates the wealth of this world and does not pay attention towards spiritual wealth, he is at a big loss, because, when he dies he leaves his wealth in this world and goes to the next world.
>
> (Midhat 2004, 121; quoted in Ruffle 2011b, 23)

The spiritual lesson in Midhat's biography of Fatimah aligns with the morals imparted by the *kahani*. The Jewish merchant's tremendous wealth meant nothing if he lacked faith in God, whereas Fatimah and her family may lack fancy clothing and a palatial home, yet they are rich in God's love and favor, and they will savor the rewards and pleasures of Paradise as compensation for their profound piety. The subcontinental spiritual emphasis on "good words, good deeds, good actions" that is foundational in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist notions of *karma*, as well as the Parsi (Zoroastrian) concept of *asha*, is also reflected in this Shiʿi linking of good action and the accumulation of spiritual wealth, or future heavenly reward.

Shiʿi *muʿjizat kahanis* are stories with theological, symbolic, and narrative complexity. Their narration in domestic environments has resulted in these stories being classified as a type of household ritual and as "women's stories." Stories that are told in the context of the home are by their very nature private, making them more available for their organization and participation by women. Casual miracle stories are told any time by men and women of all ages. Miracle stories are a way to be closer to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, just as they are a means of seeking their aid and reaffirming one's faith through vows to tell a *kahani*.

Human Rights and Communal Harmony: Re-Visioning Karbala in South Asian Literary Prose

With the rise of the short story, novel, and playwriting in twentieth-century South Asian literature, the events of Karbala and Imam Husain's martyrdom emerged

as a compelling theme crossing sectarian boundaries and linguistic registers. The Karbala theme has been used by twentieth century Hindu, Sunni, and Shiʿi writers in the 1920s as a nation-building exercise to quell the rise of religious communalism, as a metaphor to explain the violence of the 1947 Partition of India, and as an ethical model of human rights and universal truth in the 1970s.

Dhanpat Rai Srivastava, popularly known as Premchand, was born into a Kayastha (a scribal caste) family in a village located near Banaras in 1880. As an inaugural member of the Progressive Writers' Movement of India (*anjuman-e taraqqi pasand-e musaniffin-e Hind*), Premchand's short stories, novels and plays embraced the ideals of literary and social realism and of secularism, which he believed was essential to alleviating the communal tensions ascendant between Hindus and Muslims in the 1920s with the continued rise of anti-colonial agitation against the British and with nationalist movements solidifying along religious lines. In 1924, Premchand wrote his Hindi-language play "Karbala" with the dual intention of unifying Hindus and Muslims through Imam Husain, and also demonstrating his own devotion to the Karbala martyrs by writing this artistic work (Hyder 2005, 275).

Premchand situates "Karbala" as an Islamic analogue to the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which focus on ethical models of kingship (*rajadharma*), and the constant, sometimes cataclysmic battle between justice and oppression. In Premchand's play, whether in its initial Hindi version or in the later Urdu iteration, "Karbala" *is* Indian history. It becomes "domesticated, stripped of its foreignness so as to make it more comprehensible and appealing to Hindus" (Hyder 2005, 276). Premchand establishes a model for later fiction writers who use the Karbala theme by interweaving Mir Anis's *marsiyahs* into the text of his play, enhancing the overall aesthetic effect by having figures such as Zainab speak a high register of classical Urdu while lamenting the destruction of her "house," referring to the Ahl-e Bait. We see Premchand's agenda to build communal harmony at work in one particular subplot where the close relationship of Hinduism and Islam is told through the relationship of Sahas Rai and Imam Husain. Sahas Rai, the leader of the Hindus living in Arabia, was

devoted to the Prophet Muhammad and his family. Rai and his sons, according to the tradition of the Husaini Brahmins I outlined in Chapter 1, were supporters of Imam Husain at the battle of Karbala. As Sahas Rai and his Hindu compatriots use their bodies to protect the Imam from the arrows of Yazid's army, Husain proclaims, "O Truth Worshippers! We salute you. You are not believers [in Islam], but a religion that has followers who are Truth-worshipping and willing to die for justice, followers who understand life to be insignificant [in the struggle for justice]" (Premchand 1985, 249; quoted in Hyder 2005, 279). For Premchand, both Islam and Hinduism are equally religions of truth, and he holds up Imam Husain's model of truth and justice before all else as mutually compatible with the ethics and values of both religions.

Ismat Chughtai was born in 1915 in Badaun, Uttar Pradesh into a well-educated family. Chughtai's father was employed by the Indian Civil Service and they moved around India frequently during her childhood. Chughtai obtained her Bachelor of Arts in Education from Aligarh Muslim University in 1941, and it was there that she became involved in the Progressive Writers' Movement of India. Ismat Chughtai gained considerable notoriety for the feminist themes that dominated her short stories, particularly her 1942 short story "Lihaaf" ("The Quilt"), for which she was charged with obscenity. When Ismat Chughtai was 60 years old, she published *Ek qatra-e khun* (A drop of blood), a novel about the battle of Karbala in which she set Mir Anis's *marsiyahs* into prose form. In the years before she wrote *Ek qatra-e khun*, Chughtai was frequently in attendance at *majlis* mourning assemblies held in women's *imambaras* in Mumbai during the month of Muharram, where she was known to exclaim, "He was amazing! What an amazing person Imam Hussain had been! Look at all that he had accomplished!" (Hyder 2017). For Chughtai, *Ek qatra-e khun* is a demonstration of her *hubb-e Ahl-e Bait*, but the novel explicitly connects Imam Husain's sacrifice at Karbala with truth and human rights. Chughtai eloquently and passionately writes in her brief foreword of the universal responsibility all humans share in the revolutionary justice of Imam Husain's struggle:

> This is the story of those 72 human beings, who on behalf of human rights (*huquq-e insan*), confronted imperialism. This 1400-year-old story is today's story, for even today, it is said that a human being's greatest enemy is another human. Even today, the standard-bearer of humanity is humankind. Even today, in some corner of the world when some Yazid rises up, then a Husain comes forth to devour him. Even today, light is on hand to battle darkness.
>
> (Chughtai 1976, Foreword)

Chughtai's ideological commitments are made abundantly clear to the reader before she even begins reading the novel: humanity is embroiled in an eternal struggle between the oppositional forces of truth and justice. We can choose to be in the light of truth and learn from Imam Husain's model, or we can follow the path of Yazid, concerned only for power and self-aggrandizement. For Chughtai, Karbala is a profound revolutionary symbol of human empowerment through human rights and equality for all.

The Karbala of modern Hindi and Urdu prose literature is not the site of the miraculous, rather the battlefield and its heroes are presented as political and socio-ethical models for South Asians living in a modern world. Saʿadat Hasan Manto's short story "Yazid" (1951, translated into English in 2009 by Khalid Hasan as "The Great Divide") and Rahi Masoom Raza's Hindi-language novel *Adha Gaon* (1966, translated into English by Gillian Wright as *The Feuding Families of Village Gangauli*) both engage Karbala themes to explain the violence of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and the millions of Hindus and Muslims who crossed the border and died during this perilous passage. Like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the epic qualities of the Karbala narrative have helped to explain and critique twentieth-century Indian history.

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Theoretical Lessons

- Female voices and emotions are constitutive of Shiʿi devotional literature and is the framework on which cultural memory of the Karbala event is overlaid. The feminine voices and emotions of the women of the Ahl-e Bait – Zainab, Sakinah, Fatimah Kubra – are recurrent in Shiʿi mourning poetry, and orators inhabit their perspectives to amplify emotions in the mourning assembly. Shiʿi cultural memory is based on the testimony and memorializing performed by the women of Imam Husain's family.
- As a theme, Karbala is malleable while retaining an essential core meaning emphasizing justice and triumph over oppression and tyranny. As a theme, Karbala is at once the site of the miraculous, and for others a symbol of human rights and equality.

Notes

1 More accurately, the act of striking the head causing blood to flow is known as either *tatbir* or *qamah-zani*.

2 A full translation of the *nauhah* can be found in Hyder and Petievich 2009, 117.

3 The twelve Imams, the Prophet Muhammad, and his daughter Fatimah al-Zahra.

4 For further discussion and use of this title, see Amy Carol Bard 2015, 146–149, and Schubel 1993, 65-70. This story will henceforth be referred to by this title.

5 See Chapter 5 for a discussion of the meaning and function of the call for blessing on the Prophet Muhammad (*salawat;* also known as the *durud*).

6 Houris refer to dark eyed, white-skinned heavenly figures who inhabit Paradise. *Houris* are mentioned as a heavenly reward for the believers. Most references to the *houris* and their beauty in the Qurʾan are found in the earlier Meccan revelations (ca. 610–622), which tend to place greater emphasis on God's unicity, that there will be a coming Resurrection and Day of Judgment after which individuals will be rewarded with Paradise and its delights or consigned to the torments of Hell.

7 *Batul*, the "virgin," is one of Fatimah's honorific titles. Another name bestowed on Fatimah that emphasize her bodily and spiritual purity includes *Tahirah*, "the pure," which refers to being in a state of ritual purity.

8 The Urdu word *shadi* is polysemous and Shiʿi writers often play with its multiple meanings, as is the case in this miracle story. In the sentence above, I have chosen to translate *shadi* as "joy," one of the meanings of this word, although its other primary meaning, "wedding" or "marriage" would have been equally appropriate. In this context, *shadi* as the emotion "joy" is set up in opposition to "grief" (*gham*), the opposite of what one should experience at a wedding.

3

In the House of the Tenth: Spaces of Shiʿi Devotion

Throughout India and Pakistan, Shiʿa gather together in special buildings to venerate ʿ*alam*s and replica-representations or *shabih* of Imam Husain's shrine-tomb (*taʿziya*) and sarcophagus (*zarih*), as well as to participate in the *majlis-e ʿaza* (mourning assemblies) in which cultural memory of Karbala is performed. These buildings are multifunctional, also serving as mosques in some

communities, and marriages and other lifecycle events often take place within their walls. Reflecting their architectural form and ritual function, these buildings are known by the terms *ʿashurkhanah* ("house of the tenth"), *imambara* ("the mansion of the Imam"), *chilla* (a tombless memorial shrine), *bargah* ("court"), and *imambargah* ("court of the Imam"). The form and function of these buildings are explicitly South Asian, the origins of which can be traced back as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century with the rise of the Shiʿi Qutb Shahi dynasty in the South Indian Deccan, with later innovations in architectural style developed in North India in the eighteenth-century princely state of Awadh. *ʿAshurkhanahs* and *imambaras* developed in harmony with local South Asian religious architectural forms and material cultural practices (see Chapter 4), and not as a derivative form of Iranian Shiʿism, as is popularly assumed. The *ʿashurkhanah* and *imambara* were first built in South Asia in the sixteenth century, predating the Iranian *husainiyyah* and *tekiyyah*, where mourning assemblies and dramatic reenactments of the Karbala tragedy are performed, by nearly two centuries (Chelkowski 2015, 190). The deliberate integration of local forms with religious symbolism in the *ʿashurkhanah* and *imambara* constitute the ritual locus of South Asian everyday Shiʿism, where people gather to participate in *majlis* mourning assemblies, and gaze on *taʿziyas* and *ʿalams* to remember Karbala and make present the Imams and Ahl-e Bait.

Many of these buildings can be considered "shrines" because they contain objects that we may classify as associative relics, that is, the items that once belonged to the Imams and members of the Ahl-e Bait. The Urdu words for these relics indicate their religious significance for Shiʿa. As *tabarrukat*, these are charged sacred objects that confer "blessing" on those who enter into their presence. In the form of *nishan* and *asar*, relics are "signs" of the presence in absence of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait in South Asia. *ʿAshurkhanahs*, *imambaras* and other Shiʿi buildings are shrines because they are spaces of interpersonal, intimate, and reciprocal devotion between individual devotees and the Imams and Ahl-e Bait who are made present through the relics, sacred objects, and rituals of collective memory of Karbala. Adding to the South Asian Shiʿi sacred

landscape are tombs attributed to members of the Ahl-e Bait, notably Bibi Pak Daman in Lahore where Ruqayyah bint ʿAli, daughter of Imam ʿAli and Umm al-Banain, settled in the aftermath of the battle of Karbala (discussed in Chapter 1). Mosques occupy a somewhat less important role in comparison to *ʿashurkhanahs* and *imambaras* because of their more limited ritual function as exclusively a place for prayer, which I will discuss in greater detail below.

The Imams have also left a physical imprint on the South Asian landscape. Hand- and footprints (*panjah*- and *qadam-sharif*) of Imam ʿAli, the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, and the Prophet Muhammad are impressed in rocks and on hillsides across the subcontinent from Hyderabad in the Deccan to Lucknow and Delhi in northern India to Hyderabad, Sindh, and Balochistan in Pakistan. The proliferation of footprints attributed to the Imams and Prophet Muhammad have special importance in India and Pakistan, where the tradition most likely draws on earlier Indic practices of venerating the footprints (*pada*) of the Buddha and the Hindu deity Vishnu. Wells (*hauz* or *baoli*) and springs (*chashmah*) are also associated with the miraculous ability of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait to cure the ill, most likely connected to earlier traditions of the Prophet Muhammad's saliva and sweat being endowed with healing qualities (Wheeler 2010, 359). The Shiʿi veneration of footprints and the ingestion of healing waters are pan-Islamic, however, in South Asia these practices participate in a common subcontinental "grammar of tradition" with Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains.

Art historian James W. Allan has observed that "the sub-continent proved a much more inventive ground for Shiʿi architecture than Iran" (2012, 142). Allan offers a number of possible explanations for why this might have been the case, including the religious diversity of Indic society where Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Islamic building practices created a visually rich landscape. He also notes that as a newer religious community, the Shiʿa may have used architecture as a means to establish their identity visually in this diverse context. There was likewise a need to build spaces where Shiʿa and Muharram procession participants of other faiths might be able to congregate. Most importantly, the Shiʿa needed special buildings where the battle of Karbala and Imam Husain's

martyrdom might be ritually remembered in the *majlis-e ʿaza* (mourning assembly) and relics could be stored and displayed (Allan 2012, 142). Over the past five centuries, South Asian Shiʿa have constructed diverse architectural forms for congregating to remember the battle of Karbala, display devotional objects representing the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, and for prayer.

Mosques

In 2005 I was spending a warm afternoon chatting with several women in the airy living room of Dr. Zakia Sultana's home located in Purani Haveli, a Shiʿi neighborhood in Hyderabad's Old City. Zakia is one of Hyderabad's most prominent female *majlis* orators, or *zakirahs*, and I attended a number of women's mourning assemblies during Muharram in which she masterfully spoke. Zakia lives (she now also lives part-time in the United States) in a traditional courtyard-style house. The interior of the house is hidden behind tall walls; upon entering one finds a beautifully landscaped garden around which the dining and living areas are constructed as open pillared halls. Bedrooms and other private rooms are built off to the side and behind closed doors. One catches cool breezes during the heat of summer and enjoys the rain of the monsoon in these open rooms, as well as the regular call to prayer. During one leisurely conversation, a sudden scratching of a loudspeaker was followed by the dissonant recitation of the *muʾazzin* calling people to prayer. I knew I was in a Shiʿi neighborhood because the call to prayer (*azan*) is different in two respects from the Sunni call to prayer, which are underlined below:

Allahu akbar	God is greatest
Allahu akbar	God is greatest
Allahu akbar	God is greatest
Allahu akbar	God is greatest
Ashhadu anna la ilaha illaʾllah	I bear witness that there is no god but God
Ashhadu anna la ilaha illaʾllah	I bear witness that there is no god but God
Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasul Allah	I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God
Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasul Allah	I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God
Ashhadu anna ʿAliyyun wali Allah	I bear witness that ʿAli is the viceregent of God
Ashhadu anna ʿAliyyun hujjat Allah	I bear witness that ʿAli is the proof of God
Hayya ʿala al-salah	Make haste toward prayer
Hayya ʿala al-salah	Make haste toward prayer
Hayya ʿala al-falah	Make haste toward success
Hayya ʿala al-falah	Make haste toward success
Hayya ʿala khair al-ʿamal	Make haste toward best action
Hayya ʿala khair al-ʿamal	Make haste toward best action
Allahu akbar	God is greatest
Allahu akbar	God is greatest
La ilaha illaʾllah	There is no god but God
La ilaha illaʾllah	There is no god but God

Following the repetition, "*Ashhadu an Muhammadan rasul Allah,*" (I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God), the *muʾazzin* makes two additional declarations that are absent from the Sunni call to prayer: "*Ashhadu*

an ʿAliyyun wali Allah; ashhadu an ʿAliyyun hujjat Allah" (I bear witness that ʿAli is the vice-regent (or friend) of God; I bear witness that ʿAli is the proof of God). These two additional statements are a testament to ʿAli's status as Muhammad's spiritual and political successor as the Imam of the Muslim community. As Shiʿi theological concepts, viceregent or friend of God (*wali Allah*) and proof of God (*hujjat Allah*) reinforce the belief that ʿAli and the eleven Imams who were his successors are endowed with divinely sanctioned authority transcending Muhammad's earthly political power. The extra line to the *azan* declaring ʿAli *wali Allah*, known as the *wilayah* of ʿAli, was made by Salman Farsi, a Companion of the Prophet, following the events at Ghadir Khumm during Muhammad's Farewell Pilgrimage in 632. This addition caused controversy amongst the majority of the Muslim community, which the Prophet attempted to quell by reassuring them that he had just declared ʿAli to be the vice-regent of God at the wellspring of Khumm: "Whomever accepts me as master (*mawla*), accepts ʿAli also as master (*mawla*)." In Arabic, *mawla* and *wali* are derived from the same triliteral root w-l-y, which means helper, friend, master, patron, and ruler (and more). The *wilayah* of ʿAli only assumed normative status in the seventeenth century with the consolidation of Shiʿi state power and religious doctrine in Safavid Iran (Takim 2000, 169-173).

The second major difference comes with the line exhorting the faithful to "make haste toward the best action" (*hayya ʿala khair al-ʿamal*). This line emphasizes good deeds and positive actions reflecting divine justice (ʿ*adalah*) as a central theological belief. The call to good works further distances Shiʿa from Yazid's self-centered political tyranny, bringing them closer to emulating the socio-ethical model of an idealized Shiʿism lived by the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. The Shiʿi *azan* also does not include the encouraging line that the dawn (*fajr*) "prayer is better than sleep" (*as-salatu khair min al-nawm*). Unlike Sunnis who pray five times daily, the Shiʿa pray three times, at dawn (*fajr*), the second prayer is between noon and the late afternoon in which *zuhr* (noon) and ʿ*asr* (mid-afternoon) prayers are compressed, and the last prayer is offered between sunset (*maghrib*) and nighttime (ʿ*isha*). Both Sunni and Shiʿi men offer their daily ritual

prayers (*namaz*) in mosques, although they may also do so in their workplaces or in any other space that is clean and to which it is possible to point in the direction of Mecca.

In India and Pakistan, women do not go to mosques for prayer and instead perform *namaz* in the privacy of the home or, perhaps, in the ritual space of the ʿ*ashurkhanah* or *imambara*. While the call to prayer rang out over the loudspeaker outside of Zakia Sultana's house, we all covered our heads in a gesture of pious respect and continued our conversation. For many Shiʿi women, the mosque is the domain of masculine religiosity, whereas the ʿ*ashurkhanah* or *imambara* is an accommodating site for their spiritual needs and activities, including prayer. Traditionally, women do not participate in collective prayers in mosques, although there is generally no formal prohibition against doing so. The customary practice of *purdah* (sex segregation predicated on women's status as the bearers of ʿ*izzat*, honor or prestige, for her family) has shifted female prayer to the home, ʿ*ashurkhanah*, or *imambara*. My own experience with mosques in India and Pakistan is admittedly limited considering my gender. It is possible to enter most mosques outside of prayer times, although some do indicate whether or not women are allowed to enter. This is applicable to all mosques, and particularly to Sufi shrine-tombs, where there is a general prohibition against women entering into the building containing the grave of the saint because of patriarchal tradition and taboos regarding women's impurity during menstruation.

Aside from the frequency of the call to prayer, how do we know whether a South Asian mosque is Shiʿi? To a non-Muslim, the sectarian orientation of a mosque might not be immediately obvious. One might look for clues that visually announce the mosque's loyalties and devotion to the twelve Imams and the Ahl-e Bait. Shiʿi religious architecture frequently invoke the numbers 3, 5, 12, and 14 in archways and pillars. These numbers symbolize the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatimah al-Zahra, and the twelve Imams. Table 3.1 describes Shiʿi number symbolism and permutations of the Imams and members of the Ahl-e Bait it represents. A Shiʿi mosque, ʿ*ashurkhanah*, or *imambara* may have a 5-

arched entrance to the main hall, 3 interior halls, and 14 pillars – each number representing a different constellation of sacred personages.

A building's Shiʿi orientation may also be learned through reading inscriptions. Most common are calligraphic *tughra*s (a circular calligram) inscribed with the names of the *panjetan-e pak*. The individual names of the Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah, ʿAli, Hasan, and Husain are also sometimes inscribed in individual *tughra*s that are placed along the upper register of a room's walls (for example, in the prayer hall where the *mihrab* pointing the direction to Mecca is located).[1] The Shiʿi *kalimah* (statement of belief) is another inscription that directs the viewer to the sectarian identity of a religious building: "There is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God, and ʿAli is the friend (*wali*) of God." The Qutb Shahi congregational mosque, built in 1597, has a particularly evocative inscription that unequivocally marks it as a Shiʿi mosque. The inscription declares, "Oh God, until the advent of Sahabul Amir [the Mahdi], may this place of prostration survive like the Kaaba" (Allan 2012, 62). This inscription attests to the future return of the twelfth Imam (the Mahdi, also known as the Imam of the Age) who will vanquish evil and restore justice for a period before the day of Resurrection (*yawm-e qiyamah*). Until that day happens, the inscription entreats that the Jamiʿ (congregational) mosque serve as an enduring focal point of faith and prayer for the Shiʿi community. The inscription has proven effective! The mosque still stands in Hyderabad's Old City, 550 yards to the east from the monumental Charminar.

Table 3.1 Shiʿi number symbolism

Number	Holy Figures Symbolized
Three	The Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah al-Zahra, and Imam ʿAli; the number three symbolizes Husain, the third Imam
Five	The "*panjetan-e pak*" (the Five Pure Ones): The Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah al-Zahra, Imam ʿAli, Imam Hasan, and Imam Husain
Twelve	The twelve Imams: 1. ʿAli 2. Hasan 3. Husain 4. ʿAli Zain al-ʿAbidin 5. Muhammad al-Baqir 6. Jaʿfar al-Sadiq 7. Musa al-Kazim 8. ʿAli Reza 9. Muhammad al-Taqi 10. ʿAli al-Naqi 10. Hasan al-ʿAskari 12. Muhammad ibn Hasan, known as al-Mahdi, and Imam-e Zaman
Fourteen	The "*chardah maʿsumin*" (the Fourteen Infallibles): The Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah al-Zahra, the twelve Imams

Case Study-Microscopic 3.1: Toli Mosque, Hyderabad

One of the most interesting mosques that I have seen in South Asia is the Toli mosque, built in the Karwan locality of Hyderabad during the reign of the Qutb Shahi sultan ʿAbdullah (r. 1626–1672), in 1671. The mosque is built on a massive raised platform with a large water tank for performing ablutions (*wuzu*) before prayer. The mosque is divided into two prayer halls; the interior contains the *mihrab* (semi-circular prayer niche, in which the direction toward the Kaʿba in Mecca is indicated by the *qiblah*), and the outer hall provides space for people to pray. Entrance to the mosque is through five arches, symbolizing the "Five Pure Ones" (*panjetan-e pak*), namely, the Prophet Muhammad, ʿAli, Fatimah, Hasan, and Husain. The bottom half of the semi-circular enclosure of the *mihrab* is made by five arched rectangular slabs, again, bringing the *panjetan-e pak* into the devotional present through architectural form. The mosque's two minarets rest in massive bases that are designed to look like the local Deccani *kalasha*, a metal pot with a large base and small mouth that is a symbol of auspicious abundance in Hinduism. Brackets on the exterior of the building supporting the eaves (*chajja*) imitate the tusk of an elephant, a feature seen on Hindu temples

throughout the region. As the noted historian H.K. Sherwani observed, support for the roof comes from the Islamic arch, however, “quite a number of niches are set in the pillar and lintel style,” drawing on Indic imperial and temple architecture (1967, 66).[2]

Although the exterior of this jewel-like mosque is beautiful and its symbolism is rich, the outer hall of the mosque delights with its creative use of microarchitecture that is seen in Figure 3.01. Microarchitecture is an architectural motif that redounds in form and meaning in the context of South Asian Shiʿism. Microarchitecture was used by the builder of the Toli mosque to decorate its interior with small-scale models of itself (Lambourn 2010). In the interior we see a miniaturized mosque replica with three arches, symbolizing Muhammad, ʿAli, and Fatimah. *Taʿziya*, representations (*shabih*) of Imam Husain’s shrine-tomb at Karbala, comprise a second form of microarchitecture that is distinguished by its portability and the creative license associated with its replication. This second form of microarchitecture is far more common than the small-scale architectural mimicries found in the Toli mosque, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 4.

On a hot June day in 2016, while I waited for the noontime (*zuhr*) prayers to finish at the Toli mosque, I stood at a respectful distance while men, young and old, came to do their ablutions – they were also joined by a goat looking to cool off from the heat of mid-day – and I thought about the many “lives” of this building. Originally a Shiʿi mosque, at some point, most likely in the eighteenth century in the decades after the collapse of the Qutb Shahi dynasty in 1687, it evolved into a prayer space for the city’s larger Sunni community. The building still retains its architectural elements of ʿAlid devotion, although they are now invisible to a community that does not define itself through architectonic expressions of love and loyalty to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. When prayers concluded and I was able to speak with a group of older men from the mosque, they were at first hesitant to let me enter, so a man took my camera and assured me he knew exactly what I wanted him to photograph! Looking through the photos, which were blurry and only focused on the inscriptions around the prayer

niche, standing outside I could see the architectural features I so keenly wanted to document. Finally my husband Andreas was allowed entry while I made small talk with the men standing outside. I asked them if they knew that this was originally a Shiʿi mosque, and some seemed astonished by its history. I pointed out the arches and its microarchitecture. My evident knowledge of the mosque had the desired effect: I was granted access the interior of the sacred space.



Figure 3.01 Toli mosque microarchitecture.

Photo by author, 2016.

The Toli mosque reflects a past era in which dynasties such as the Qutb Shahs (r. ca. 1496–1687) and the Awadh Nawabs (1722–1858) ruled over imperial cities where vibrant Shiʿi cultures flourished. Under the patronage of the Qutb Shahi sultans in Hyderabad and the princely Nawabs in Lucknow, in each city Shiʿi congregational (*jamiʿ*) mosques were built. In local neighborhoods smaller mosques were built to meet the needs of the faithful. With their spiritually powerful *taʿziyas* (replicas of Imam Husain's tomb at Karbala) and *ʿalam*s (metal standards that iconically represent the Imams and Ahl-e Bait), as well as the

increasing frequency of mourning assemblies commemorating the battle of Karbala (*majlis-e ʿaza*), buildings such as ʿ*ashurkhanahs* and *imambara*s gradually assumed a central place in the religious life of Shiʿi men and women. The precedence of these ritual spaces in Shiʿi religious life resulted in new hybrid structures in which mosques, ʿ*ashurkhanahs*, and *imambaras* were consolidated or sometimes combined. Competition for access to limited urban space and the assertion of a minority religious identity through highly visible religious rituals such as Muharram processions (*julus*) and self-flagellation (*matam*) resulted in sectarian and communal violence in parts of India and Pakistan (Masoudi Nejad 2015). Competition for space in taking out religious processions and in constructing congregational buildings has certainly influenced post-Partition (1947) building practices in which mosques and ʿ*ashurkhanahs* or *imambara*s have frequently been built in a single structure or within the same compound.

Case Study-Snapshot 3.2: ʿAshurkhanah wa Masjid-e Ahl-e Bait: A Mosque-ʿ*Ashurkhanah*in Hyderabad

One day in February 2006, together with ʿAijaz who had been assisting me with my research, I went to the ʿAshurkhanah wa Masjid-e Ahl-e Bait, located in Asif Nagar, a neighborhood near Mehdipatnam where one of Hyderabad's major fruit and vegetable markets is located. This is a relatively poor neighborhood dominated by the shops of furniture makers and numerous butcheries. The mosque-ʿ*ashurkhanah* is relatively unassuming from the outside. There are two tall minarets that signpost the religious function of this otherwise plain looking building. It is not until one enters that the strong Iranian "flavor" of its architecture is revealed, with its extensive use of geometric design, mosaic mirrorwork (*aʾineh-kari*), and inscriptions. This building fascinates me because it combines a mosque with an Indian architectural form (the ʿ*ashurkhanah*), and is decorated with a creative combination of local and Iranian decorative and devotional motifs and styles.

The building is bifurcated by an invisible line demarcating the mosque and the ʿ*ashurkhanah*. In a sense, this structure is brilliantly designed, allowing a Shiʿa to perform rituals venerating the Imams and Ahl-e Bait while also being able to complete daily prayers (*namaz*), offering a perfect solution to the challenges of everyday life. The interior of the ʿ*ashurkhanah* portion of the building was decorated in the style of a *husainiyyah*, an Iranian religious building where mourning assemblies are held to ritually remember Karbala. The 'sanctum' where the ʿ*alams* are located is decorated with Iranian-style mirrorwork known as *aʾineh-kari*. The *aʾineh-kari* work in this mosque-ʿ*ashurkhanah* combines mirrorwork and colored enamel tiles. Inside the sanctum, there are three ʿ*alams* dedicated to Qasem, ʿAbbas, and Imam Husain, who is represented by his loyal horse Zuljanah (ʿ*alam* form and symbolism is discussed in Chapter 4). The Zuljanah ʿ*alam* was brought to Hyderabad from Lucknow because there is no current tradition of honoring or venerating Imam Husain's loyal steed in the city. The ʿ*alam* dedicated to Qasem is located to the right (see Figure 3.02).



Figure 3.02 Qasem ʿ*alam*, ʿAshurkhanah wa Masjid-e Ahl-e Bait, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2006.

The ʿ*alam* is large and the main section is brass with red enamel work. Inside is an eight-pointed star, the center of which is inscribed with the name "Qasem." Beneath the star is another calligraphic inscription, "Prince Qasem, son of Hasan" (*shahzadah-ye Qasem ibn-e Hasan*). The points read: Allah, ʿAli, Hasan, one that I cannot read in my photograph, Husain, Fatimah, Muhammad." The silver *panjah* comprising the top-most of the eight points reads "Hazrat Qasem, 1356 H [1937 CE]." Above the entire ʿ*alam* is a royal *chatr* (umbrella) adorned with a crescent at the very top. Flanking the *panjah* there are two additional brass

panjahs that read “Allah.” Spread out below the ʿ*alam* is a nicely worked red and black *dhatti* (cloth). Around the base of the ʿ*alam*, several garlands of flowers have been tied. To the right of the ʿ*alam* is a Qurʾan. Each of the three ʿ*alams* are placed on a base. Above the threshold where Qasem’s ʿ*alam* is displayed there is a blood red sign that reads “Peace be upon you, Qasem ibn-e Hasan” Qasem’s name is written to look like blood is dripping from it, which is a popular aesthetic effect in Shiʿi calligraphic renderings of the names of Imam Husain, ʿAbbas, and the other heroes who were martyred on the Karbala battlefield, a motif we saw in the Muharram banner in this book’s introduction.

Notably, this ʿ*ashurkhanah*-mosque is dedicated to the memory of Qasem, the son of the second Imam Hasan, who was martyred at Karbala shortly after marrying his youthful cousin Fatimah Kubra, Husain’s daughter. In addition to the ʿ*alam*, there is a niche located outside of the sanctum to the right, in between the mosque’s *mihrab* and the ʿ*ashurkhanah*, which represents the “*hajalah-gah*,” or Qasem’s marriage canopy. The walls of this niche are painted a vivid red. The border is further embellished with red flaming candles and incense, which can be seen in Figure 3.03. Just below the border, the red walls have a number of inscriptions written in Urdu, including “the encampment of the bridegroom of Karbala” (*khaimah-gah-e naushah-e Karbala*). On the facing wall, there is more calligraphy and a slab holding a pot for burning incense and frankincense. Again, a white burning candle in the shape of a lotus and incense burner is painted on the wall. The calligraphy reads “Please light wax candles and incense here.” The niche below showed the melted wax of previous offerings and, on the occasion of our visit, several incense sticks were burning.

In the main seating area, there is a salutation written to Qasem in a band below the ceiling. The wall is made of black stone with mirrorwork arches and white pillars. Inside each arch a salutation is written: “Ya ʿAli, ya Allah, ya Muhammad, ya Fatimah, ya Hasan, ya Husain.” These calligraphic inscriptions offering salutations to the *panjetan-e pak* (the Five Pure Ones) and God are comprised of bright yellow stone bordered with mirrorwork. The effect is vivid and fits in with the exuberant color scheme that dominates the ʿ*ashurkhanah*-

mosque interior. During the first ten days of Muharram, additional ʿ*alams* are installed on the shelf sitting a couple of feet above the floor. Above is a verse written by a poet named Afzal:



Figure 3.03 Qasem's marriage canopy, ʿAshurkhanah wa Masjid-e Ahl-e Bait, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2006.

“Peace be upon you, O Qasem ibn-e Hasan

In this nauhah, your “Afzal” is bonded to you in lament

In this assembly, the spirit of Zahra weeps for Qasem.”

Around the corner in another part of the ʿ*ashurkhanah* is the fourth dedication to Qasem. Painted on white marble are five white illuminated candles symbolizing

the *panjetan-e pak*. There is a marble slab below, and during Muharram ʿ*alams* are installed here. Above the arch there is a calligraphic inscription: “Peace be upon you *shahzadah-ye* Qasem ibn-e Hasan.”

I met with Mirza Asadullah Baig, whose family built this *masjid-*ʿ*ashurkhanah*. The Baigs are of Turko-Iranian heritage and came to India approximately two hundred years ago. Mirza Asadullah Baig’s face, with its sharp features, reflects his mixed heritage. A further sign of his Iranian heritage was the sweetened black tea we were served. No milky Indian chai for us! I began our conversation by telling Mirza Asadullah Baig that this is the first ʿ*ashurkhanah*-mosque that I have ever seen. His face glowed with pride at the innovativeness of this religious structure. According to several people, including Mirza Asadullah Baig, it is the only such combined religious structure in Hyderabad. Mirza Asadullah Baig told me that after the *jumaʿ* or Friday noon prayers perhaps 800–900 people perform “visitation” (*ziyarah*) to the ʿ*alams* here.

Associated with the ʿ*ashurkhanah*-mosque is the Anjuman-e Ahl-e Bait, a men’s association that performs self-flagellation (*matami guruh*) during Muharram and other important mourning events in the Shiʿi ritual calendar. The Anjuman (association) was established by Mirza Asadullah Baig and ʿAbbas Mirza in 1974 with the belief that “ʿ*azadari* of ‘*mazlum-e Karbala*’ is like our breaths [sic] in our life. We feel that life without ‘ʿ*azadari-e* Husain (a.s)’ is useless to live” (Anjuman-e Ahl-e Bait n.d.). Approximately two hundred young men are members of this association. On *arbaʿin* (16 Safar), the *bibi ka* ʿ*alam*[3] leaves from the Abbas ʿ*ashurkhanah* in the nearby neighborhood of Masab Tank and arrives in front of the ʿAshurkhanah wa Masjid-e Ahl-e Bait around 6:30 or 7 p.m.

Telling me more about his family’s connection with this building, he said that they have been the caretakers of the ʿ*ashurkhanah*-mosque for a long time, and their only goal is to host prayers (*namaz*) and *majlis* mourning assemblies to remember the suffering of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. I asked if this is a form of religious reward (*sawab*) for them, and Mirza Asadullah Baig’s face again lit up and he said, “yes.” I asked Mirza Asadullah Baig his profession, and he explained

that he holds a seat on Hyderabad's City Council, and that his family also own significant property holdings.

I asked Mirza Asadullah Baig how long the 7 Muharram *mehndi ki majlis* commemorating Qasem and Fatimah Kubra's battlefield wedding has been taking place at this *ʿashurkhanah*. According to Baig, his family has hosted this mourning assembly for the past four generations here in India. It is held at 9 p.m. on 7 Muharram and is a women's (*zanani*) mourning assembly attended by nearly five hundred women. Ghulam Abrat is the orator (*zakir*) for this annual *majlis*. Here, Mirza Asadullah Baig pointed to the *zananah*, or women's section, located upstairs. Unlike the space allocated to women in many other *ʿashurkhanahs* and *imambaras*, this space looks comfortable and offers easy viewing access through the stone latticework (*jali*). So often women are unable to view the proceedings of the mourning assembly as they are required to sit behind heavy curtains or in out-of-the-way rooms during the men's (*mardane*) *majlis*. On the seventh of Muharram, the *ʿalam* dedicated to Qasem is taken out on a brief procession, and trays of *mehndi* are carried, which women apply to their palms. Many Hindu and Sunni women also come to the *ʿashurkhanah* on 7 Muharram to make vows (*mannat*) to the *ʿalam* and to apply henna to their palms in order to contract marriages for themselves, sons, or daughters. In the period following *mehndi ki majlis*, many weddings are arranged, so the wishes for marriage alliances made during this event are believed to be granted by intercession of the Ahl-e Bait. Mirza Asadullah Baig said that in particular many young Hindu girls come to make vows to Qasem.

I asked Mirza Asadullah Baig about the origins of the *hajalah-gah* in his *ʿashurkhanah*. Apparently, this is a more recent addition to the building, which he constructed following a pilgrimage to Karbala. Before he was married, Mirza Asadullah Baig went on *ziyarah* ("visitation" to the shrine-tombs of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, see Chapter 6) during the Iran-Iraq War, traveling to Karbala from Basra by road. Before going on pilgrimage, he had a dream before the dawn prayers in which it was raining, and he saw four or five women – most likely the female members of the Ahl-e Bait. He also saw Qasem's wedding canopy. After

his pilgrimage to Iraq, he returned to Hyderabad and began work on expanding the ʿ*ashurkhanah*. Mirza Asadullah Baig explained that he believes the ʿ*ashurkhanah*-mosque to be a miraculous construction of which the Ahl-e Bait are the engineers. In fact, the building was constructed without the aid of professional architects or engineers. Before Mirza Asadullah Baig went on *ziyarah* the building was much smaller. I asked him about the mirrorwork design that predominates the interior, and he said it was completed 25 years ago (ca. 1980, although perhaps sometime in the mid-1980s). The work was commissioned by him and mirror workers were brought from Mumbai to do the installation. Every year he has these same workers return to do maintenance and keeping it looking new.

Seemingly a case study about a mosque, the built space of the ʿAshurkhanah wa Masjid-e Ahl-e Bait, its inscriptions and the devotional objects it displays reveal the ways in which cultural memory of Karbala, the Imams, and family of the Prophet Muhammad (Ahl-e Bait) constitute a significant part of everyday religious life for South Asian Shiʿa.

In the House of the Tenth: ʿ*Ashurkhanahs* in Southern India

In Hyderabad and throughout South India, Shiʿa participate in mourning assemblies (*majlis-e ʿaza*) to remember the suffering and martyrdom of Imam Husain and his supporters at the battle of Karbala in buildings known as an ʿ*ashurkhanah*.[4] The ʿ*ashurkhanah* is the building where mourning assemblies are held and more importantly, where ʿ*alam*s are displayed for devotees to venerate and from which to seek intercession (see Chapter 4). ʿ*Ashurkhanahs* do not follow a prescribed architectural form, unlike the mosque with its domes, minarets, and plinth or pedestal, raising the building above the ground. ʿ*Ashurkhanahs* vary in size from the massive, multibuilding complex that comprises the Badshahi (royal) ʿ*ashurkhanah* in Hyderabad, to small rooms in which an ʿ*alam* is displayed in the family home.

Much of the Shiʿi ritual calendar takes place in buildings such as *ʿashurkhanahs* and *imambara*s. Many Shiʿa gather on a weekly basis to participate in a mourning assembly, usually on Thursday, known as *jumʿa-rat* (Friday-eve), an important day for spiritual pursuits including going to a Sufi *dargah* to listen to *qawwali* long into the night. These weekly mourning assemblies are less formal than those held during the ten days of Muharram or even the lengthier *ayyam-e ʿaza*, the two months and eight "days of mourning" that stretch from the beginning of Muharram until the eighth day of the third Islamic month Rabiʿ al-Awwal. The *ʿashurkhanah* is a popular place for Shiʿa to offer prayers, and women actively participate in *ʿamal* (practice), votive prayers of intercession that are recited in times of crisis or need that I address in Chapter 6. In addition to prayers and the ritual remembrance of the battle of Karbala, the martyrdom of the other Imams, Fatimah al-Zahra, and other members of the Ahl-e Bait are observed throughout the year during mourning assemblies held in these spaces. The ritual calendar is also punctuated with joyous events including the birthdays of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, which are true celebrations (*jashn*) where special sweets are served and poems of praise are recited (see Chapter 6). Looking at a Shiʿi ritual calendar indicates the frequency that *majlis-e ʿaza* and *jashn* take place in addition to the weekly cycle of mourning assemblies and quotidian cycles of intercessory prayer.

ʿAshurkhanahs are materially rich spaces that are constituted by a Shiʿi repertoire of objects that make the Imams and Ahl-e Bait physically present to diverse religious communities of devotion dedicated to Imam Husain and Karbala. The primary objects that are kept and displayed in *ʿashurkhanahs* are *ʿalam*s. In Hyderabad, many *ʿalam*s are what I call "reliquary." Embedded within these standards are objects associated with the particular individual that the *ʿalam* represents. In most *ʿashurkhanahs*, *ʿalam*s are displayed during the ten days of Muharram and are then locked away in a storeroom for the rest of the year. Chapter 4 focuses on material objects kept inside *ʿashurkhanahs*, *imambara*s and other religious buildings where Muharram commemorations happen.

Like the mosque, ʿ*ashurkhanahs* and *imambara*s have movable pulpits (*minbar*), on which a *majlis* orator (*zakir*) sits to deliver narratives about the sufferings of the heroes of Karbala. In its most basic form, a *minbar* looks like a short flight of stairs with flat seating (ʿ*arsh*) at the top, which is draped with cloth, usually black to symbolize mourning for Imam Husain. The *minbar* at the Badshahi (royal) ʿ*ashurkhanah* in Hyderabad's Old City is made of wood, the steps of which are painted green and the balustrade is painted white (see Figure 3.04). Affixed to the ʿ*arsh* are three ʿ*alam*s, including one in the shape of a palm (*panjah*) in the middle.

Household and more modest ʿ*ashurkhanahs* typically lack a formal *minbar* and the *majlis* orator sits on a cloth-covered chair above the devotees who sit on large white sheets covering the floor.

To spend time in an ʿ*ashurkhanah* during Muharram is an intensely olfactory experience. Tendrils of smoke waft up from large and small pots called an ʿ*ud-dan*, which are metal or clay incense burners. Shiʿa and other devotees bring offerings of incense (*agarbatti*) to be burned in these censers and in return they take small amounts of ash to smear on their foreheads or other parts of their body that require healing. The ash taken from the incense burners is called ʿ*udi* and its application is similar to the Hindu practice *vibhuti*, referring to the practice of smearing sacred ash to parts of the body, particularly the forehead. Some buildings such as the Paltan ʿ*ashurkhanah* dedicated to Imam Husain's half-brother ʿAbbas, located on the outskirts of Hyderabad, keep separate spaces for the lighting of candles and small oil lamps (*diya*) that burn down creating black soot (see Figure 3.05), which is also collected and applied to the body for healing purposes like ʿ*udi*. I was told that people go specifically to this ʿ*ashurkhanah* to take ʿ*udi* because this candle and incense ash is especially powerful.

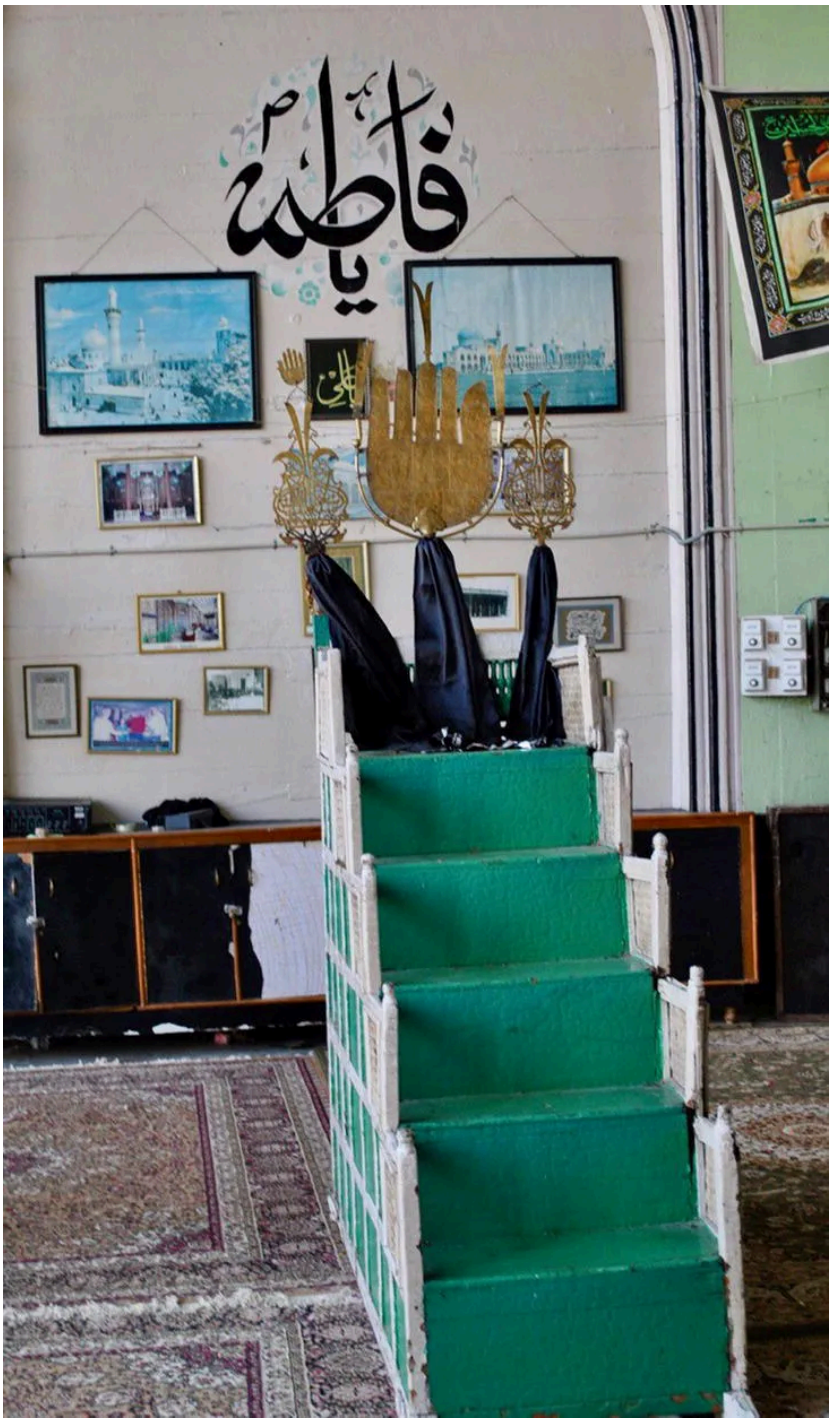


Figure 3.04 *Minbar,* Badshahi ʿ*ashurkhanah*, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2005.

Candles and incense illuminate, perfume, and heal devotees in the ʿ*ashurkhanah*. In the courtyards of many ʿ*ashurkhanahs* fire pits called *alava* are dug and enclosed with brick. Jaffur Shurreef describes in vivid detail the rituals associated with the *alava* in his 1832 ethnography of Muslim religious life in the Deccan:



Figure 3.05 Candles and soot at the Paltan ʿ*ashurkhanah*, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2015.

In front of each *ashoor-khana* is dug a circular pit, from one cubit and a half to eight cubits[5] in diameter, and the same in depth; occasionally, with a small wall round it. This is called an *allawa* (bonfire). These are dug annually in the same spot. Commencing from that day inclusive [1 Muharram], they kindle fires in these pits every evening during the festival; and the ignorant, old as well as young, amuse themselves in fencing across them, calling out, *Ya Allee! Ya Allee!* (Oh Allee! Oh Allee!); *Shah Hussun! Shah Hussun!* (noble Hussun! noble Hussun!); Shah Hosein! Shah Hosein! (noble Hosein! noble Hosein!); Doolha! doolha! (bridegroom! bridegroom!); Haee dost! haee dost! (alas, friend! Alas, friend!); Ruheeo! Ruheeo! (stay! stay!) every two of these words are repeated probably a hundred times over…

> Of those who have vowed, some leap into the still-burning embers, and out again; others, leap through the flame, and some scatter about handfuls of fire.
>
> Source: Jaffur Shurreef, *Qanoon-e Islam, or the Customs of the Mussulmans of India*, trans. G.A. Herklots, 2nd. ed. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991), 113.

These are particularly important to non-Muslim, especially Hindu, devotees of Imam Husain and his family. During the nights of Muharram, fires are lit in the *alava* and people gather around to recite poems extolling the bravery and suffering of Imam Husain and his family and to sing folk songs about Karbala in Urdu and Telugu languages (Naqvi 2006, 15). *ʿAlam*s are also taken out in procession and brought before the fire pits.

Lions, Arches, and Chains: Visual Representation and Symbolic Meaning in Shiʿi Built Spaces

Navigating the crowded lanes of Hyderabad's Old City where vendors wheel wooden carts selling almost any item you can imagine: glassware, plastic combs, household necessities, vegetables (onions, eggplants, leafy greens, carrots, and potatoes), ladies' hosiery and makeup, and the salty-sweet Osmania biscuits that are especially tasty with a glass of milky (and very sweet) tea, it is remarkably easy to walk past an *ʿashurkhanah* hidden down a quiet alley or tucked behind tall gates. Some gateways lead to *ʿashurkhanah*s and their courtyards where sizable crowds of devotees gather during mourning assemblies to hear *marsiyah* poems and to weep while listening to the narratives of Imam Husain's sufferings (*masaʾib*) recounted by professional orators. In these same courtyards, self-flagellation is performed by hands striking chests in time to *nauhah* short poems (see Chapter 2). Gateways (*darwazah*) and walls provide important visual clues that behind its edifice stands an *ʿashurkhanah*. Many of the external markers and motifs that one sees have a powerful discursive function in connecting local communities to Shiʿi cultural memory and prophetic history.

One of the most obvious visual cues to look for is color symbolism. Happening on a wall or gateway, or fluttering flag atop a gleaming white building, green often indicates the presence of some sort of Shiʿi religious building in Hyderabad and other parts of South India. Green is a recurrent symbol in Shiʿi material culture. Green represents the Prophet Muhammad, the lushness and abundance of Paradise, and the progeny of the Bani Hashem, which in the Shiʿi context refers to the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatimah al-Zahra and her husband ʿAli ibn Abi Talib, the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. Green also symbolizes the second Imam Hasan, whose body is said to have turned this color when he was poisoned, causing his martyrdom in 670. Images of the Imams and members of the Ahl-e Bait such as Hazrat ʿAbbas proliferate with green imagery, swathes of green cloth flutter in shrine-tombs, and green flags (*jhanda* or *parcham*) wave. Imam ʿAli is conventionally depicted in portraits in a green turban and Hazrat ʿAbbas's standard (ʿ*alam*) is affixed with green flags. Red is another recurrent color symbolizing the blood shed by Imam Husain on the battlefield of Karbala. At the Naʿl-e Mubarak ʿ*ashurkhanah* (see Figure 3.06) the gateway is painted green, and red is used to accent the door and to inscribe the name of the building above the arch. Below the *chajja* (a projecting eave with supporting brackets), the names of the *panjetan-e pak* and Allah are written in red paint.

As discussed above, the numbers 3, 5, 12, and 14 are likewise frequently invoked in Shiʿi religious architecture. The Naʿl-e Mubarak ʿ*ashurkhanah* has 12 arches in its entry gate, symbolizing the twelve Imams. There are 11 small arches at the very top of the gate located above the *chajja*, and the large archway that is the entrance to the ʿ*ashurkhanah* complex, cumulatively indexing the twelve Imams. The use of these sacred numbers serves important purposes, first by making the Imams, Prophet Muhammad, and Fatimah al-Zahra materially present through a type of symbolic speech expressed through architectural forms, such as arches and pillars. Second, these symbolic motifs have a powerful subconscious effect on instilling the cultural memory of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait in an environment

that simultaneously integrates Islamic and Indian architectural forms and style to create spaces that connect pan-Shiʿi historical memory of Karbala to the local.



Figure 3.06 Gateway to Naʿl-e Mubarak ʿ*ashurkhanah*, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2015.

Depictions of mythological and real animals are often painted or rendered in plaster bas relief on the exterior gates or walls of ʿ*ashurkhanahs*. One of the most popular and explicitly Shiʿi iconographic images that you will see is the tiger, an Indic substitution for the lion (*sher*), which was more geographically limited in its distribution and had somewhat less cultural cache in south Indian religious

and imperial cultures. In Shiʿism, *sher-e khuda* (lion of God)[6] principally refers to Imam ʿAli, and according to the visual anthropologist Pedram Khosronejad, it also signifies religiously valiant men, particularly, "*pahlavan* (heroes) and *luti* (the brave men), who were without doubt good Muslims and dedicated their lives to their community" (2012, 208). Khosronejad quotes a story explaining how ʿAli acquired his title, *sher-e khuda*: "On his return from battle Imam Ali saved a lion who had fallen into a water cistern. The lion became quite attached to the First Imam and followed him wherever he went. This same lion went to help Imam Hoseyn at Karbala, however, it arrived after the tragedy had occurred" (Tanavoli 1985, 24, quoted in Khosronejad 2012, 208–209). We learn that ʿAli was a brave warrior with a compassionate heart who helped those in need, no matter whether they were human or animal. We also notice the lion's absolute loyalty in protecting ʿAli's heirs, particularly Imam Husain. As a symbol of bravery and loyalty, lions (or tigers) are found on ʿ*ashurkhanahs*, flags, ʿ*alam*s, and more ephemeral objects such as keychains, stickers, and devotional posters in South Asia.

The second type of zoomorphic image that adorns the exteriors of ʿ*ashurkhanah* walls and gateways is Buraq, the mythic creature that conveyed the Prophet Muhammad on his nighttime journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (*isra*ʿ). According to art historian Christiane Gruber, later in Islamic tradition the Prophet Muhammad's heavenly ascension from Jerusalem via a ladder (*miʿraj*) was collapsed with the more fanciful nighttime journey astride Buraq (2012, 40). The *isra*ʿ and *miʿraj* merged to become one event on which the Prophet Muhammad rode from Mecca to Jerusalem and up through the heavens on Buraq. The Arabic word *al-buraq*, meaning, "little lightning flash," is grammatically gendered both masculine and feminine. Medieval Muslims gender coded some of al-Buraq's qualities as explicitly masculine: lightning flashes at an extremely rapid speed and is powerful. *Dabba* (beast of burden) and *baghla* (mule) are terms that are coded as feminine and were also used to describe Buraq in medieval texts. Gruber's analysis of fourteenth-century paintings depicting the Buraq leads her to conclude that "this terminology and post-eighth/fourteenth-

century Islamic paintings that depict al-Buraq with feminine attributes (such as long tresses, jewelry, and sometimes breasts) apparently gave rise to the idea common today that the prophet Muhammad's flying steed was female or at least bore some female characteristics" (2012, 41).

In the medieval period, the Buraq came to assume anthropomorphic qualities. The white animal is described as being bigger than a donkey, and by the thirteenth century and after, had acquired a female human head with a golden crown, wings, and a peacock's tail. Painting Buraq on the outside of Shiʿi religious buildings is a visual reference to Imam Husain's white horse, Zuljanah, who stood bravely as Imam Husain's body was riddled with arrows on the Karbala battlefield, which we see in Figure 3.07 of the winged steed portrayed on the walls of the Bibi ka Alava ʿ*ashurkhanah* in Hyderabad. In Central and South Asian cultures, a white horse is reserved for spiritual and worldly leaders (Frembgen 2012, 180).

The Alava-ye Shahzadah-ye Qasem, a small streetside ʿ*ashurkhanah* dedicated to Imam Husain's teenage nephew Qasem, is located on a busy thoroughfare in the Yaqutpura neighborhood of Hyderabad's Old City. Its walls are visually dense with Shiʿi symbolism. If you look above the doorways of street-side ʿ*ashurkhanahs* or to the space above the main arch of an exterior gate, it is common to see a design that looks like an extended hand (*panjah*). The extended palm is an auspicious and protective symbol that is often inscribed with the name ʿAli, ʿAbbas, or Husain, although sometimes the names of other Imams or members of the Prophet Muhammad's family may also appear. In Hyderabad, another conventional ʿ*alam* shape installed above doorways is a teardrop with three fans extending from the top, which was first used by the Shiʿi Qutb Shahi sultans who liked to place this symbol of devotion on many buildings. These objects are ʿ*alam*s, which for South Asian Shiʿa symbolize and materially manifest the Imams and Ahl-e Bait (see Chapter 4). The size of a small room, the Alava-ye Shahzadah-ye Qasem juts into the traffic-filled road, its dark green exterior wall indicating its religious purpose. Above the doorway is a painted ʿ*alam* inscribed with "ya Allah" (O, God) crowned with a royal parasol. Flanking

each side of the upper register of the doorway are paintings of Buraq with its large peacock tail and a face with delicate features, golden crown, and long, dangling earrings. In the middle on each side of the door are disembodied hands holding bloodied swords, and at the bottom are open mouthed lions – transformed in the contemporary South Asian context into a tiger[7] – an image symbolizing ʿAli, holding a sword, which most likely is his majestic double-tipped weapon Zulfiqar.



Figure 3.07 Buraq, Bibi ka Alava, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2005.

A distinctive feature flanking archways and gates of some ʿ*ashurkhanahs* and other Shiʿi religious buildings are heavy iron chains (*langar*). Some Shiʿi

religious buildings have heavy chains extending like floral garlands across the threshold of each side of the door or entry gate. The Panjah Shah-e Wilayat ʿ*ashurkhanah* in Hyderabad's Old City provides a fascinating case study that explains the miraculous and intercessory powers of the *langar* (chain) and its connection to the Prophet Muhammad and ʿAli, thus transcending geographical space and time.

Case Study-Microscopic 3.3: Panjah Shah-e Wilayat ʿ*Ashurkhanah*, Hyderabad

The Panjah Shah-e Wilayat ʿ*ashurkhanah* in Hyderabad's Old City was built during the long reign of ʿAbdullah Qutb Shah (r. 1626–1672) and it contains several significant foot- and handprint relics belonging to the Prophet Muhammad and Imam ʿAli (see Figure 3.08 of the latter's handprint), respectively. I would like to digress here to focus on this ʿ*ashurkhanah*'s history and the association of themiraculous that links together an event from Shiʿi history to a moment in contemporary Hyderabadi religio-political affairs. This ʿ*ashurkhanah* links sacred space and material objects into a remarkable story that takes place in the built environment of Panjah Shah-e Wilayat. These relics are attributed to the Farewell Pilgrimage of Muhammad and his supporters when they stopped at the wellspring (*ghadir*) at Khumm in 632. The pilgrims were tired and thirsty from their travels and dropped a bucket into the well to slake their thirst. Curiously, the bucket was grabbed from within the well, and the mysterious being snatched the rope, too! The Prophet asked ʿAli to go down into the well and investigate. ʿAli put his left hand on the black stone surrounding the well and descended inside, where he fought with *jinn* (mischievous spirits made of smokeless fire). Triumphant, ʿAli climbed back out of the well and again placed his left hand on the black stone, leaving an impression. These impressions were acquired by ʿAbdullah Qutb Shah from a man named Sayyid Aman Ullah Rizvi, who was living in Iraq with the assistance of the Safavid king (ʿAzmi 2000, 42-43).



Figure 3.08 Imam ʿAli's handprint, Panjah Shah-e Wilayat ʿ*ashurkhanah*, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2015.

When the relics arrived in Hyderabad, they were installed in their own ʿ*ashurkhanah* and were bestowed with royal insignia, including a parasol (*chatr*) and the royal fish ensign (*mahi maratib*). The entrance to the ʿ*ashurkhanah* is flanked by a chain with four tablets containing verses from the Qurʾan. Hazrat Mir Mahmud, a pious man who was forced to flee Iran and settled into a life in exile in Hyderabad, bestowed the heavy chain and tablets to the ʿ*ashurkhanah*, seen in Figure 3.09. Hazrat Mir Mahmud had the chain affixed to the ʿ*ashurkhanah* entrance with the belief that any person who visited this site and its sacred objects would be relieved of her or his troubles, marking the ʿ*ashurkhanah* as a spiritually powerful space. To disbelieve the intercessory power of Panjah Shah or its relics is an invitation to incite the wrath of this sacred space. In the story that follows, the impious and self-aggrandizing behavior of a man named

Mir Aftab Jung[8] shows the miraculous, supernatural actions of the Panjah Shah-e Wilayat to protect itself and punish its human tormentor’s remarkably impious behavior.



Figure 3.09 Chain and tablets, Panjah Shah-e Wilayat ʿ*ashurkhanah*, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2015.

Aftab Jung was intoxicated with the power the sixth Nizam Mahbub ʿAli Khan had given to him. He conjured up an evil plot to convert the Panjah Shah-e Wilayat ʿ*ashurkhanah* into a horse stable. He must have believed himself to be the "Aurangzeb of the age," and fancied repeating that king's act by which he requisitioned the Badshahi (royal) ʿ*ashurkhanah* to be a sort of garage (*bandikhanah*) for storing his wheeled vehicles after conquering Hyderabad. Aftab Jung commanded that by a particular date, the keeper (*mujavir*) abandon the building and its grounds; failure to do so would result in the complete demolition of the ʿ*ashurkhanah* and murder of his family! The *mujavir*'s pleas begging Aftab Jung not to do such a thing fell on deaf ears. Each day that passed brought damage and destruction of the

ʿ*ashurkhanah* closer and closer, and the *mujavir* would do anything to the save the holy relic, even if it cost him his own life. With just 30 minutes before Aftab Jung's threat to raze the ʿ*ashurkhanah* and kill the *mujavir*'s family was set to go into action, the keeper placed the relic on his head and decided to leave. Reaching the middle of the ʿ*ashurkhanah* courtyard, clouds gathered and a heavy rain began to fall. The *mujavir* waited and waited for the rain to stop, eventually returning with the relic to the ʿ*ashurkhanah*'s porch. The clouds suddenly cleared, although the moment he stepped off the porch with the relic, torrential rain again beat down. Despite the rain, the *mujavir* departed the ʿ*ashurkhanah* because he knew the terrible violence Aftab Jung would inflict on the building and his family. The keeper walked through the downpour attempting to bring the relic to the home of a prominent Shiʿa living in nearby Irani Galli. In a short time, so much rain fell that the *mujavir* struggled to walk against the flowing water.

Eventually, the *mujavir* realized the situation and returned with the relic to the ʿ*ashurkhanah*, which he placed back in its original spot. By this time, the deadline for abandoning the ʿ*ashurkhanah* had passed. Suddenly, the *mujavir* heard crying and shouting. Aftab Jung was vomiting blood, and shouting out, "The *mujavir* has put black magic on me! It is as though a knife has stabbed me in the chest!" The rapidity by which Aftab Jung fell ill was astonishing. When the Nizam heard what happened, he was greatly upset and ordered that Aftab Jung bring a garland of flowers to the ʿ*ashurkhanah* [in penance]. The moment Aftab Jung received this command from the Nizam, he brought a garland and tied it to the iron chain at the ʿ*ashurkhanah*. The flowers fell from the chain and Aftab Jung lost consciousness and later died.

Source: Based on Rahat ʿAzmi, "The Holy Relics at Hyderabad," in *Hyderabad ki Azadari*, ed. Syed Taqi Hasan Wafa, trans. Syed Mohammed Taher Bilgrami. (Hyderabad: Idara-e Jaʿferia, 2000), 44.

The historical *bona fides* of this account of Aftab Jung's impious impertinence as told by Rahat ʿAzmi are less important than what the story accomplishes to reinforce the sanctity of the ʿ*ashurkhanah* and the spiritual power of the relics

and the iron chain. The narrative does not make explicit reference to the origin myth of the *panjah-sharif* (sacred handprint) of ʿAli from the *ghadir* (wellspring) at Khumm where he fought the *jinn* who stole the bucket and rope, yet this story parallels the floral garland Aftab Jung, who as a human stand-in for the *jinn* was forced to offer in penance for his tyrannous actions. For those who pass under or touch the iron chain in Panjah Shah-e Wilayat, all troubles and afflictions will be removed amongst those who sincerely believe. At the entrance to the ʿ*ashurkhanah* between the massive black stone cistern and the arched porch strung with the iron chain is another long black stone beam on which the following Persian couplet is inscribed (ʿAzmi 1978, 47):

Each person who enters this tomb-shrine with sincerity,

Can be assured that their prayers will be answered.

Imambaras: Dwelling in the Court of the Imam

When Lucknow was established as the capital of the Nawabs of Awadh in 1775, it emerged as a center of North Indian Shiʿi religion and culture. In 1722, Saʿadat ʿAli Khan (r. 1722–1739) established the princely state of Awadh in Faizabad, which was later moved approximately eight miles west to the small town of Lucknow by the fourth Nawab Asaf al-Daulah (r. 1775–1797), who is acclaimed for ushering in what many consider a "golden age" of Shiʿi culture and architecture in the new princely capital. Asaf al-Daulah commissioned the construction of the Bara Imambara, the "Great" Imambara, a massive building complex that is distinguished by a number of unique architectural features. From Lucknow's founding as the capital of the Awadh dynasty until its collapse in the aftermath of the Great Rebellion against the British in 1857, thousands of buildings called *imambaras*, both small and large, were established throughout the city. These explicitly Shiʿi religious spaces were constructed to display tomb replicas (*taʿziya*) of Imam Husain's Karbala shrine-tomb, metal crests and standards (ʿ*alam*), particularly the palm insignia of Hazrat ʿAbbas, and other material objects that help Shiʿi devotees cultivate feelings of devotion for the

Imams and Ahl-e Bait. The combined effects of the British takeover of India after the 1857 Rebellion and the Partition of 1947 resulted in the destruction and abandonment of the majority of Lucknow's *imambaras*; many others have been repurposed by the city's growing population into residential or commercial spaces.

The first *imambaras* were not built in Awadh but instead further to the east in India's frontier zone in Bengal. We have record of an "*imambarhi*" (Imam's mansion) called the Husaini Dalan that was built in Dhaka (in current-day Bangladesh) in 1642, and in the early eighteenth century, another structure was built in the commercial port of Hughli by a man named Agha Muhammad Mutahhar (Allan 2012, 76). Nawab Asaf al-Daulah (d. 1797) reinvigorated Shiʿi religion and culture in the subcontinent with his ambitious building program and sponsorship of Muharram rituals after he shifted his capital to Lucknow in 1775. Asaf al-Daulah transformed the Lucknow skyline with the religious architecture he commissioned. Under Asaf al-Daulah's reign, Lucknow became a visibly Shiʿi city of mosques, *imambaras*, and *karbala* burial grounds. Before Asaf al-Daulah's reign, the city skyline was dominated by a Sunni mosque that perched atop a hill called Lakshman Tila, a site connected to the epic *Ramayana*, and deeply sacred to the region's Hindus. The mosque's construction was attributed to the last great Mughal emperor ʿAurangzeb (r. 1658–1707), who in the popular imagination is regarded as a persecutor of Shiʿa and Hindus, a topic worthy of further problematization and analysis that lies far beyond the scope of this study.

Throughout South Asia, there are two types of *imambaras*, domestic and public. In domestic *imambaras* "families kept bamboo replicas of the tombs of the Imams in their homes … and women often placed wax candles in front of these cenotaphs as they prayed for the Imam's intervention to grant them a boon" (Cole 2005, 153). For women, the domestic *imambara* constituted the ritual center of everyday religious life during Muharram. Today, women participate in Muharram processions (*julus*), whether as observers or possibly helping with carrying the family or neighborhood *taʿziya*. Until Partition, however, this was not the case. The size and grandeur of a domestic *imambara* is dependent on a

family's status and wealth. In the past, even the poorest families set aside a small corner of the house to set up a miniature *taʿziya*, thus creating an ersatz, ephemeral *imambara*, whereas the wealthy had the space and financial means to allocate a large hall for the permanent display of a *taʿziya* and *ʿalams*, as well as to host regular Thursday evening *majlis*.

Case Study-Microscopic 3.4: The Bara Imambara of Lucknow

Asaf al-Daulah's expansion of the Panj Mahal palace complex (redolent with symbolism of the "Five Pure Ones") to include a Shiʿi mosque and *imambara* built on a monumental scale that formally declared Lucknow an explicitly *Shiʿi* city. Construction began on the expansion of the Panj Mahal complex in 1784 to provide relief to local residents suffering from food shortages, and by the time work was completed in 1791, it was justified to call Asaf al-Daulah's *imambara* the *bara* or "Great" *imambara*, because of its majestic size (see Figure 3.10).



Figure 3.10 Bara Imambara, Lucknow.

Source: Ishtman. Divided into nine compartments, the Bara Imambara's main hall, called the Persian hall, is a vast 50 meters long and 15 meters wide. Flanking each end of the main hall are two more galleries, maintaining the same width but half as long (nonetheless, each gallery is an impressive 75 meters in length). Spanning above the main hall is the largest unsupported vaulted ceiling in the world; this means that it uses neither crossbeams nor pillars to support its weight, lending the hall a vast and airy atmosphere. The ceiling is just over 49 feet high, where it arches into a barrel-vaulted ceiling. Off the main hall, a gallery extends to the southern side and can be viewed through delicate arches decorated with white floral designs. Inside this southern gallery is a platform elevated three feet above the main hall and called *shah-nashin* (royal seat) where *taʿziya* and *ʿalams* are displayed. The India hall is located on the western end of the main hall. This is popularly known as the "*kharbuzah*," or melon room, and is famous for its acoustics; whispers can be heard from one side of the gallery to another, and from the ground floor to the second. It is great fun for young and old to test this acoustic wonder, and it can get quite loud! The eastern gallery is known as the Chinese hall, which is square at the ground floor and transforms into an octagon at mid-level, and at its peak, the room has 16 sides. Even more wondrous than the Indian and Chinese halls is the massive labyrinth that courses above the entire length and breadth of all of the galleries and main hall of the Bara Imambara. The purpose of the labyrinth, the *bhul bhulaiyan*, is to support the massive ceiling. The first time I wandered the arched hallways of the *imambara's* labyrinth in 1997, I felt a mix of emotions as one moment I walked down a passage in sunshine and light, and in the next reached a dead-end cast in cool gloom, forcing me to find a way back to the correct path. The maze may be an architectural necessity, yet I think it perhaps also serves an important theological function. The maze is like the spiritual path to God – sometimes clear and without obstacles, and other times difficult and requiring guidance. It is a source of reflection on Imam Husain and his sacrifice at Karbala, inspiring one to never give up or despair when stuck in the proverbial labyrinthine dead-end.

Throughout the main hall of the Bara Imambara are arched rooms that display permanent *taʿziya* (see Figure 3.11). Most notable are 14 silver *taʿziya*, representing the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatimah al-Zahra, and the twelve Imams (the *chardah maʿsumin*).

In the middle of the main hall stands Nawab Asaf al-Daulah's tomb oriented diagonally to the rest of the objects in the *imambara*. The seemingly odd placement of Asaf al-Daulah's tomb (as well as the adjacent Asafi mosque) is in fulfillment of the Islamic injunction that all Muslims be buried facing in the direction of Mecca (Chelkowski 2006, 110).[9] There is no legal requirement that an *imambara* or *ʿashurkhanah* orient itself in the direction of Mecca, although some do place their principal *ʿalams* or *taʿziyas* in this symbolic direction.



Figure 3.11 *Taʿziya*, Bara Imambara, Lucknow.

Photo by author, 1997.

The Bara Imambara's monumental size, accentuated by its lime plaster stucco exterior, shining a brilliant white, is awe-inspiring to the viewer for whom the idea of an *imambara* as the Imam's court is brought to life. The Bara Imambara is Imam Husain's royal palace in Lucknow. The simplicity of the Bara Imambara's decorative scheme on the exterior of the building enhances its

spiritual power. The building's exterior is devoid of any calligraphy, geometric or floral designs. This is in stark contrast to the extensive use of calligraphy on the neighboring Husainabad Imambara,[10] built in 1838 by Nawab Muhammad ʿAli Shah (r. 1837–1842), the interior and exterior of which is a visual feast. Elaborate chandeliers made of colored glass imported from Belgium fill every inch of the *imambara*'s ceiling. The interior is a riot of color, and it is difficult to spot the *taʿziyas* and *ʿalams* at first because there are so many lamps and other objects demanding your visual attention. The *imambara's* exterior (see Figure 3.12) is lushly inscribed with Arabic calligraphy, including verses from the Qurʾan, *hadith*, the Shiʿi *kalimah* (there is no god but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God; ʿAli is the friend, *wali*, of God), the names of the *panjetan-e pak*, the *Nad-e ʿAli* prayer (see Chapter 6), and the declaration, "There is no hero except ʿAli; there is no sword except [his sword] Zulfiqar" (for images of the calligraphic inscriptions, see Keshani 2015, 118–124).

Karbala Grounds: Pilgrimage and Burial

Imam Husain and 72 of his supporters sacrificed their lives on the banks of the Euphrates River in Iraq at a small place called Karbala. By the last decades of the tenth century, a formal shrine had been established to mark the place where Imam Husain was martyred, which was further renovated and expanded by the Iranian Safavid and Qajar kings between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Burial at the shrine was considered an especially meritorious act for Shiʿa beginning around the ninth century. As early as the tenth century, Karbala emerged as an important site of pilgrimage (*ziyarah*) for Shiʿa who considered Imam Husain's shrine-tomb and the soil of its immediate environs to be sacred. Karbala soil became a prized, sacred keepsake from one's pilgrimage to Karbala. The "greenish yellow" soil was compressed into tablets called *turbah* on which one places the forehead in prostration (*sajdah*) during prayer (*namaz*) or which is ingested for the purposes of healing an illness.



Figure 3.12 Calligraphic inscriptions, Husainabad Imambara, Lucknow.

Source: Kthankbye. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fc/Chota_Imambara_Window.jpg. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 International.

Karbalas are polyvalent religious built spaces that bridge the geographical distance for Shiʿa between Karbala and the subcontinent. A cemetery is transformed into *karbala* when the sacred soil around Imam Husain's shrine-tomb in Karbala is sprinkled over its ground. A *karbala* is also a place where *taʿziyas* are buried on ʿ*ashura*. For South Asian Shiʿa, Karbala is the ultimate pilgrimage destination, yet it has long been nearly impossible to reach, both financially and geographically. Drawing on their religious ingenuity, South Asian Shiʿa brought Karbala to India by transporting its soil to sprinkle in graveyards, which through Sir James Frazer's notion of "contagion" transformed these cemeteries into "little Karbalas" based on their contiguity with Imam Husain's shrine-tomb (1925, 38). With the ease of air travel and the ubiquity of pilgrimage companies advertising their services on the Internet, however, ever larger numbers of South Asian Shiʿa now undertake pilgrimages to the major shrine-

tombs (ʿ*atabat-e ʿaliyat*) of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.

"Karbala" assumed a particular spatial form and function during the reign of the Shiʿi Nawabs who ruled Lucknow in North India. The Nawabs were *sayyid*s who claimed descent from the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim, and whose ancestors had migrated to India from the Khorasan region of northwest Iran. The Nawabs ruled Lucknow and Awadh from 1722 until 1858, the year after the 1857 Great Rebellion that swept over much of North India in which Muslims and Hindus rose up against British economic, political, and social domination. At present there are at least 12 active *karbala*s in Lucknow, although during the Nawabi period, there were significantly more. We do not know how many *karbala*s were active during the nineteenth century due to damage caused by the British after the 1857–1858 Great Rebellion, shifts in patronage, and the encroachment of urban development on the large, open spaces required by *karbala* grounds. The Nawabs were of Iranian descent, hailing from Nishapur – famed for its turquoise (*firuzah*) stones and tiles – located in the eastern region of Khorasan, near the shrine city of Mashhad where the eighth Imam, Reza is buried. From the ascendance of the first Nawab beginning in 1722, through the reign of Saʿadat ʿAli Khan II (r. 1798–1814), these rulers and their wives held burial in Karbala, Iraq in great esteem. For virtually all of the Nawabs and their wives, burial in Karbala was a pious aspiration. They instead invested large sums of money in religious endowments (*waqf*) and building projects at the shrine-tombs in Karbala (Tandon 2008, 244). In addition to these pious endowments, the Nawabs and other Shiʿa nobility in Lucknow and other parts of the Awadh region of North India sought to make spaces where their burials could be performed with the exalted status that would be accorded as if they were interred in Karbala's sacred soil.

*Karbala*s commissioned by Lucknow Nawabs and Shiʿi nobility express a high degree of improvisation and integration of local architectural elements. The architects and builders often had never traveled to the major shrine cities of Iraq, Iran or Syria, and although Lucknow's *karbala*s were modelled on Imam

Husain's tomb, their "layout, the plan-form, silhouette and other compositional attributes … were all freely handled" (Tandon 2008, 245). For the patrons of these structures, exact replication of Imam Husain or ʿAbbas's tombs in Karbala was not necessarily the objective.[11] In his doctoral dissertation, Youshaa Patel observes the relational quality of *tashabbuh*, which transcends mere imitation or assimilation to have the more active connotation of assuming or affecting a likeness or resemblance to some thing or someone (2012, 7). The seventeenth-century Ottoman Syrian mystic-legal scholar Najm al-Din al-Ghazzi's philosophical reflections on the concept of *tashabbuh* offer valuable insights into the importance and flexibility of "imitation" in Islam. For Ghazzi,

> imitation, as a technology of becoming, has its limits. Ghazzi states the imitator desires 'to be the likeness of the imitated' … the imitation is limited to being only a *likeness*, a simulacrum, of the imitated. This definition suggests that the imitator can only approximate the reality of the imitated, and can never be exactly like the one imitated – the original… Yet, despite suggesting that an ontological barrier separates an imitation from the original, Ghazzi does not indicate that it is necessarily inferior. On the contrary, his definition leaves open the possibility that an imitation may just be different, or perhaps even better than the original.
>
> (Patel 2012, 9)

Ghazzi's conceptualization of *tashabbuh* directly applies to the principles of South Asian Shiʿi material culture and architectural forms, such as the *taʿziya* and *karbala*. These are *likenesses* of the original forms. The desire to imitate – to establish a likeness of the original – does not mean that it aims to exactly replicate it. As we shall see below, a *karbala* establishes a general likeness to the shrine-tomb of Imam Husain or ʿAbbas in Karbala, creating a ritual place for *taʿziyas* and people alike to be buried and to perform pilgrimage. The principle of *tashabbuh* enables certain types of cultural memory to be established for Shiʿa. Shiʿi ritual objects and religious architecture serve as physical *aides-mémoire* in the form of a *shabih*, an image or likeness, or what Christiane Gruber (2016, 264) calls a "simile," to make Karbala and the Imams immediate (for

further elaboration of the relationship of *shabih* to Shiʿi material objects see Chapter 4).

North Indian *karbala*s conform to a relatively standardized spatial configuration:

> Nawabi *karbalas* too almost always had vast quadrangular courts or *sahn* with one or more entrances, tiny chambers built on all sides of the enclosure walls, and enormous open grounds, which were littered with graves and which were abundantly planted with palm trees. Much as in Karbala too, Nawabi *karbalas* also almost always had a lofty free-standing circular minaret … that was built to one side of their enclosure. In Nawabi *karbalas*, the position of this minaret varied in the various examples in keeping with changes in the orientation of their main shrines … Their main or ceremonial entrance lay on one side of their short axis, and was flanked by a pair of minarets of a circular outline which had a balcony on top … Nawabi *karbalas* comprised usually two and sometimes more chambers, which assumed rectangular, square or occasionally polygonal forms. These chambers contained the symbolic graves of Husain and Ali, and were surrounded by ambulatories for the circulation of the faithful in their lifetimes and their burial after their deaths.
>
> Source: Based on Banmali Tandon, *The Architecture of Lucknow and Oudh, 1722-1856: Its Evolution in an Aesthetic and Social Context* (Cambridge: Zophorus Books, 2008), 245–246.

The walled area enclosing the symbolic shrine-tomb of Imam Husain (or other holy figures) abounds with the graves of Shiʿi faithful and is richly planted with palm trees, which index Imam Husain's martyred body. According to tradition, Imam Husain's funeral bier was covered with palm branches to protect his battered body from the desert sun (Korom 2003, 46). A fascinating account is told by the Iranian Shiʿi religious scholar Shaikh ʿAbbas Qommi (d. 1940). He was the author of *Nafas al-mahmum* (The breath of grief), a compilation of *hadith*, biography, hagiography (*manaqib*), and martyrdom narratives (*maqtal*) by which he intended to form an authentic and historically accurate history of the

lives of the Imams and the battle of Karbala for contemporary Shiʿa. Qommi cites a report (*khabar*) in which Imam ʿAli and his supporter ʿAbdullah ibn ʿAbbas were traveling to the battle of Siffin in 657 (located on the banks of the Euphrates at the contemporary city of Raqqa, Syria) when they passed by a place along the Euphrates River. Imam ʿAli was afflicted with grief and began weeping at this fateful site. He told Ibn ʿAbbas of a portentous dream he had, in which "some men have descended from the heavens carrying white standards and equipped with bright and shining swords and have drawn a line on the ground. I saw that the branches of the palm-trees are reaching on the ground and frantic pure blood was dripping from them. And I saw my dear son and the light of my eyes Husain smeared in blood calling out for help, but nobody is responding to them" (Qommi [2001] 2012, 73). This report establishes a prehistory for Karbala as the site for Imam Husain's martyrdom and grief that even the natural world expressed for his death. We also observe a direct link between the palm tree and Imam Husain. More practically, palm trees provide cool shade to devotees from the blistering summer sun that beats down from March until the monsoon rains arrive in June or July.

The Nawabs and other nobles were enthusiastic builders of *karbala*s in Lucknow. These spaces served the dual purpose of translocating Karbala to India, providing substitute burial grounds where spiritual reward might be attained in the grave. Constructing *karbalas* was crucially important for the Nawabs and nobles, who despite their fantastic wealth still found the distance between Iraq and North India too great for regular pilgrimage or for the unknowability of one's date of death (see Chapter 6 for further discussion). The patronage and construction of a *karbala* by a wealthy individual or family increased religious prestige, and many of these sites were named in honor of their donors. For the general populace, *karbala*s are a site of ritual climax on 10 Muharram (*ʿashura*), when processions of devotees carry *taʿziyas* throughout the city while performing bloody forms of self-flagellation (*matam*). These processions (*julus*) move like blood pulsing through the arteries of the city to places such as *Karbala* Kazmain, one of Lucknow's most important sites of *taʿziya* burial on 10 Muharram (*ʿashura*).

Case Study-Microscopic 3.5: *Karbala*Kazmain, Lucknow

The *Karbala* Kazmain (also called Rauzah-e Kazmain) complex is emblematic of the final years of Nawabi sponsorship of Shiʿi religious architecture and space in Lucknow. In its heyday (1800–1858), Lucknow's urban landscape proliferated with *imambara*s, mosques, and *karbala*s. Throughout the city, large and small burial grounds were constructed under the patronage of notable and pious Shiʿa, and in one case, by a Hindu convert.

Jagannath Rai was a confidant of the fourth Nawab of Awadh, Amjad ʿAli Shah (r. 1842–1847), who was revered for his advanced training in Islamic sciences and was especially devoted to the Imams. During this period of friendship with Amjad ʿAli Shah, Jagannath traveled to Iran and Iraq, where he visited a number of Shiʿi shrine cities (*ʿatabat-e ʿaliyat*). Jagannath spent time in Kazmain, Iraq where the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim, and his grandson, the ninth Imam, Muhammad al-Jawad ibn ʿAli al-Reza (often referred to as al-Taqi) are buried in a shrine-tomb with two gold domes and four minarets flanking the corners. Jagannath Rai was deeply moved by the spiritual atmosphere of Kazmain and was awed by Imam Musa al-Kazim's miraculous ability to bring the mother of a young child back to life. At some point, Jagannath converted to Shiʿism and took the name Ghulam Reza Khan. Following the death of Nawab Amjad ʿAli Khan, his successor the fifth and last Nawab, Wajid ʿAli Shah (r. 1847–1856) conferred on Khan the honorific title of Sharaf al-Daulah. Considerable expense was devoted to the construction of the *karbala*, which was completed in 1851. Large numbers of artisans from Iran were hired to create the Lucknow Kazmain in the model of the Iraqi original that was the inspiration for Ghulam Reza Khan's (formerly Jagannath) conversion to Shiʿism.

Figure 3.13 shows that *Karbala* Kazmain is not at all a "likeness" (*shabih*) of the twinned tombs of Imams Musa Kazim and Muhammad al-Taqi; rather, it is an unambiguous replica that would be instantly recognizable to any Shiʿa who had performed pilgrimage (*ziyarah*) to the shrine cities of Iran and Iraq (*ʿatabat-e ʿaliyat*). While not a one-to-one replica of the Kazmain tomb-shrine, the Lucknow structure has two cylindrical drum-shaped domes and the four corners

of the building are flanked by minarets. The twin domes are stylistically similar to the Iraqi originals, albeit they are not gilded with pure gold, instead they are covered with gold-plated brass. The Lucknow Kazmain minarets are shorter in height and decorated with simple tilework compared to the rich calligraphic and geometric designs on the Iraqi originals.



Figure 3.13 *Karbala* Kazmain, Lucknow.

Source: Khalid Ahmed. Ghulam Reza Khan acquired a large parcel of land for the *Karbala* Kazmain, enough space for the shrine-tomb replica, graveyard, and for the *taʿziyas* to be buried on 10 Muharram (*ʿashura*). Khan allocated 20 *bighas*[12](approximately 12.5 acres) of land for the *Karbala* Kazmain to make this a center of Muharram ritual in Lucknow. *Karbala* Kazmain is a locus for Muharram activity in Lucknow. After the festivities of Bakr ʿId (Ar. ʿId al-Adha, "the festival of the sacrifice") conclude on 10 Dhuʾl Hijjah, crowds of vendors selling *taʿziyas* set up their stalls in the Ashrafabad neighborhood of Old Lucknow, transforming the area into a riot of color and texture. In the weeks leading up to Muharram, Ashrafabad around the *Karbala* Kazmain becomes one of the busiest and largest markets in the city for the purchase of all styles of *taʿziya*, ranging from small tissue paper designs to multistory, tinselled, and illuminated behemoths (Laharia 2018).

Many of the *taʿziyas* that are purchased by Shiʿi and non-Shiʿi devotees return to *Karbala* Kazmain on *ʿashura* for burial. The eastern courtyard of the *karbala* is known as the "*qatl-gah*" (murder site), referring to the site at Karbala where Imam Husain was martyred, which is where the *taʿziyas* are buried.[13] On 10 Muharram thousands of Shiʿa dressed in black carry *taʿziyas* in procession (*julus*), eventually making their way to one of the city's *karbalas*, including Talkatora, Nasir al-Din Haidar, and Dayanat al-Daulah. *Taʿziyas* enter through the gates of the *karbala* and after a procession around the grounds and building, are ritually "cooled" (*thanda karna*) through burial. Burial cools the *taʿziya* by releasing built-up spiritual power that has accumulated during the previous ten days; more importantly, it releases Imam Husain from his shrine-tomb replica to which he will return the next Muharram.

A second burial procession culminating at *Karbala* Kazmain takes place on 8 Rabiʿ al-Awwal, marking the end of the two-months eight-day mourning period. This ritual is the *chup* (silent) *taʿziya* procession, which was started during the *nawabi* period by Nawab Ahmad ʿAli Khan Shaukat Yar Jung. The procession departs Imambara Nazim Sahib at 5 a.m. carrying a large black *taʿziya* and makes its way to *Karbala* Kazmain around 8 a.m., where it is buried in the *qatl-*

gah, bidding farewell (*rukhsat*) to mourning Imam Husain until the new moon of Muharram is sighted the following year. *Karbala* Kazmain provides another evocative example of the collapse of the time-space continuum – this time through the idiom of mimetic architecture – that connects South Asian Shiʿa to centers of pilgrimage and historical narratives. As Katharine Bartsch and Elise Kamleh have noted, "Karbala Kazmain served as a place of devotion to the martyrs in a way that made this experience tangible, local, immediate and familiar" (2014, 290; see also Hjortshoj 1977, 167–170).

Conclusion

Shiʿi built space in South Asia is a product of its local environment. Mosques, ʿ*ashurkhanahs*, *imambaras*, and *karbala* burial grounds were built by Shiʿa as places to gather to collectively remember through narrative and poetry the battle of Karbala, as well as to house a rich repertoire of material devotional objects representing and making present the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. This architecture participates in broader South Asian rituals of displaying and taking objects out in procession and "cooling" them off through immersion or burial. Its architectural forms also facilitate acts of reciprocal gazing, an important ritual act performed by a Shiʿa when she "visits" an ʿ*alam* or *taʿziya* in an ʿ*ashurkhanah* or *imambara*. The placement of *taʿziyas* and ʿ*alams* on platforms called *shah-nashins* (royal seats or thrones) reinforces the idea that Imam Husain and his family are spiritual royalty and socio-ethical exemplars. One of the distinguishing qualities of South Asian Shiʿi religious architecture is the ways in which the spiritual royalty of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait is creatively expressed through the seamless integration of Indic and Islamic symbols of kingship. ʿ*Ashurkhanahs* and *imambaras* are extensions of everyday life for Shiʿa. These are places of prayer and healing, where one can connect with the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, and where family and community ties are restored and renewed during Muharram and other important moments in the ritual calendar.

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Theoretical Lessons

- South Asian Shiʿi religious architecture is inherently translocative, bringing the shrine-tombs of ʿAli in Najaf and Husain in Karbala to the subcontinent; it is also transportational, through the rituals performed in its spaces, collapsing time and space for devotees between the Karbala event and the present.
- *Imambaras, ʿashurkhanahs, bargahs, karbalas* and other religious architectural forms are types in which Shiʿi cultural memory is spatially expressed. This spatial imagination is expressed through architectural forms, as well as through number symbolism and highly stylized paintings representing the Imams and members of the Ahl-e Bait.

Notes

1 Sunni mosques employ a similar visual program using *tughras* containing the names of the four Rashidun, or "Rightly Guided" caliphs: Abu Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthman, and ʿAli. With the exception of ʿAli, these names will never be seen in a Shiʿi mosque because the Shiʿa do not accept the succession to the caliphate of Muhammad's first three successors following his death in 632.

2 The pillar and lintel style is also known as trabeate and is typical of Indian temple architecture. A trabeate system refers to a horizontal beam that is supported by vertical pillars.

3 This is not the *bibi ka ʿalam* that contains an important relic and is installed each Muharram in the Bibi ka Alava *ʿashurkhanah* in Hyderabad's Old City (see Chapter 4).

4 *ʿAshurkhanah* ("house of the tenth") is a compound word comprised of the Arabic-derived Urdu term *ʿashur* (tenth) and the Persian and Urdu word *khanah* (house).

5 One cubit is equal to 18 inches. By Shurreef's measurement, the *alava* range in size from 27 inches to 144 inches (12 feet) in diameter and depth, which makes some of these fire pits capable of generating a massive, blazing fire.

6 Ê¿Aliâ€™s epithet, the â€œlion of God,â€ is Asadallah in Arabic.

7 The Asiatic or Gir lion had a territory that ranged from the Balkan peninsula as far east as Bengal. As late as the early nineteenth century the Asiatic lion could be found throughout the subcontinent in Baluchistan, Sindh, Panjab, Gujarat (its current habitat), Rajasthan, Haryana, Bihar, and even Bengal. Excessive trophy hunting led to their diminished numbers in the subcontinent. The last population of Asiatic lions can be found in Gir National Forest in Gujarat, and through reintroduction projects in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The significant loss of the lion has surely resulted in recourse to substitute the tiger in the title, *â€œsher-e khuda,â€* (lion of God). The tiger has been a popular image in Mughal painting symbolizing power, bravery, and royalty, and in Sufism, a spiritual master (pir) riding astride a tiger using a cobra as a whip represents mastery over his base self and mind (Digby 1994). It is worth noting that beyond Hyderabad, ShiÊ¿i images representing Ê¿Ali as *sher-e khuda* often use the raditional lion figure, particularly on Internet sites owned and run by religious associations (anjuman) located in North India, Pakistan, or the diaspora.

8 Most likely the author refers to Salar Jung I Mir Turab Ê¿Ali Khan, who was Prime Minister (diwan) under the sixth of the Sunni Asaf Jahi Nizams, Mir Mahbub Ê¿Ali Khan (r. 1869â€“1911). Mir Turab Ê¿Ali Khan held the position of Prime Minister from 1853â€“1883. Although a Sunni dynasty, the Asaf Jahi Nizams patronized and revived ShiÊ¿i buildings and rituals that had experienced a period of dormancy following the collapse of the Qutb Shahi dynasty in 1687. The Salar Jung family, ShiÊ¿a of Iranian heritage, attained the title *umra-e aÊ¿zam* (the greatest of nobleman) from the Nizams; their descendants continue to be religious and cultural leaders in Hyderabadi

society today. Personal communication with Eric Beverley, 22â€“23 August 2018 and Ben Cohen, 29â€“30 August 2018.

9 If you visit the Panj Mahal complex, you will notice that the Asafi mosque is built at an angle diagonal to the Bara Imambara and main gate. The reason for its construction off the axis of the other buildings in the complex is so that the mosqueâ€™s *qiblah* will point in the direction of Mecca.

10 This *imambara* is also known as the Chota, or small, Imambara. The *imambara* is so-called because of its proximity to the Great (Bara) Imambara.

11 I do offer a counterexample of the explicit replication of architectural form and style of the Kazmain shrine-tomb in Iraq in a Lucknow *karbala* in Case Study-Microscopic 3.5 in this chapter.

12 A *bigha* is a measurement of land in North and East India. There is no standardized measurement for the *bigha*, which can vary tremendously from one region to the next. According to Gyan Pandey (1998, 236), a bigha in Lucknow district in the 1880s was 5/8 of an acre. I use this measurement for my calculation of Khanâ€™s allocation of land for the construction of *Karbala* Kazmain because it is the most contemporary that I have been able to identify.

13 A *qatl-gah* more generally refers to the site where all of the ShiÊ¿i Imams, with the exception of the twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi who is in Occultation (hiding, *ghaybah*), died. The ShiÊ¿a believe that the Imams and Fatimah al-Zahra were murdered and thus martyred for their status as the Prophet Muhammadâ€™s blood descendants and religiopolitical successors.

4

Metal Hands and Stone Footprints: Shiʿi Material Practice

When I first travelled to Pakistan in 2000 to conduct field research on Muharram ritual and literary-devotional traditions dedicated to the Ahl-e Bait (the family of the Prophet Muhammad), these deeply material dimensions of Shiʿism were invisible to me. I loved walking along the narrow alley that divided the sacred space of the Bibi Pak Daman[1] shrine from the chaotic crowds and traffic of the nearby Empress Road thoroughfare in Lahore, where one may purchase rose-petals, *chadars* (cloths given by devotees to cover saints' tombs), and incense. In addition to these propitiatory tools, all manner of talismanic, ritual, and commemorative objects are sold at the many stalls lining the alley leading to the shrine: *turbahs*,[2] bumper stickers, prayer books and hagiographical texts, devotional posters depicting the battle of Karbala and the Imams, and rings set with stones of carnelian, turquoise, and glass. I loved these *things*; I bought these *things*; but I did not think about their meaning or what role they have in structuring ritual practice and the sacred imagination for the Shiʿa. It was immaterial to me; yet these objects *matter* tremendously for Shiʿa.

In what ways does materiality *matter* in everyday South Asian Shiʿism? What are the distinctive features of Shiʿi material practices? The proliferation of objects in Shiʿi ritual and devotional life is intrinsic to the tradition and they form a salient marker of difference between Shiʿism and the larger Sunni tradition. This difference is articulated through the matter of the bodies of the twelve Imams and the Ahl-e Bait descended through the Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatimah al-Zahra.

Shiʿi materiality and its practices are fundamentally body oriented – centered on associative relics, sacred foot- and handprints (*qadam*- and *panjah-sharif*), the offering and partaking of food, and the physical inscription and transfer of the Ahl-e Bait's sufferings onto the bodies of devotees in the ritualized performance

of self-flagellation (*matam*). The *panjah* (hand with the five fingers extended) operates as an indexical sign of the intercessory and protective powers of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. Memory and materiality intersect with a dual ethical imperative of love and respect for the Imams and Ahl-e Bait and piety of the heart (*taqwa al-qalb*) to produce what I call a religious sensorium, a symbolically rich social space through which ritual practitioners engage with material objects and the body to produce sense-experiences that trigger cultural memory and instantiate the presence of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait.

For South Asian Shiʿa, brass, silver, and gold ʿ*alam*s (a metal flag or standard), garlanded with roses and adorned with jewels and brocade cloth, represent Imam Husain's martyrdom and sacrifice at the battle of Karbala. Large concrete waterskins (*mashk*) can be found in the courtyards of ʿ*ashurkhanah*s in the Deccan, symbolizing Hazrat ʿAbbas. Throughout North India and Pakistan, smaller water pouches called *mashk-e Sakinah* are affixed to ʿ*alams* representing ʿAbbas. These small water bags offer an instant visual cue that the ʿ*alam* is dedicated to ʿAbbas – memorializing his persona as the "*saqqah-ye Karbala*," the Water-Carrier, who sacrificed his life to collect the life-sustaining waters of the Euphrates for his beloved niece Sakinah. Throughout India and Pakistan, *taʿziya*, the imaginal representations of Imam Husain's tomb made of bamboo, tinsel, colored glass, flowers, and colored paper are made by groups representing streets, neighborhoods, and families. On 10 Muharram (ʿ*ashura*) *taʿziya* are carried through the streets and later immersed at the local "*karbala*," which may be a cemetery river, pond, or even a pit in the ground. Coffins, known as *tabut*, are carried on ʿ*ashura*, both as a symbol of the funeral and burial that was denied Imam Husain, whose decapitated body laid for days in the sweltering desert sun.

The objects of devotion mentioned above, such as the coffin replicas, *taʿziya*, waterskins, and ʿ*alam* played a central role in shaping a particular form of religious materiality that has found spiritual, cultural, and political currency among the diverse linguistic and ethnic polities that comprise South Asian Shiʿism. Material objects invoking the memory of Karbala, the Imams, and the Ahl-e Bait reflect the geographical, aesthetic, and ethnic diversity of South Asian

Shiʿa. The shape, design, and composition of ʿ*alams* in South India, particularly in the Deccan region, differ from those found in Pakistan and other parts of India. Hyderabad's most famous and sacred ʿ*alams* have relics embedded within them and are distinguished by the use of calligraphy and other decorative touches, giving many of the standards strongly anthropomorphic or human-like faces. ʿ*Alams* in North India and Pakistan are not anthropomorphic, although they do include animals and calligraphy that invoke the Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait the standard represents. *Taʿziyas*, representations (*shabih*) of Imam Husain's tomb at Karbala, are the focal point of the public processions that take place in such diverse cities as Lucknow, Darjeeling, Delhi, Mumbai, and Varanasi in India, and Chiniot, Multan, Karachi, and Lahore, Pakistan. Conversely, there is no culture of *taʿziya* construction, display or processions in places like Hyderabad, India, where the ʿ*alam* is the material conduit for remembering Karbala, the Imams, and Ahl-e Bait.

Conceptualizing Shiʿi Materiality

There is a stereotype that Islam is an iconoclastic religion, and that *all* Muslims throughout *all* of Islamic history have been vehemently opposed to *all* forms of figural representation; this is simply not correct. Scholars in the fields of Islamic art history (Abbas 2017; Flood 2002, 2006, 2009, 2016; Gruber 2009, 2016a, 2016b, 2019; Karimi and Gruber 2012; Shalem 2010; Shani 2012; Suleman 2015), anthropology (Flaskerud 2010; Frembgen 2012; Khosronejad 2012), and history and religious studies (Elias 2012; Freitag 2007; Ruffle 2016, 2017) have contributed to our understanding of the complex history of the important role objects and images have had and continue to assert in Islamic life. These studies, through their careful attention to historical contexts and sources, reveal the ways that material culture plays an important and formative part in shaping Muslim religious experience.

What is material culture and why is it an important aspect of everyday South Asian Shiʿism? At the most basic level, we might define material culture as "things" made by human beings, which in the context of religion may refer to

objects, images, architecture, sacred space, ritual implements, and relics. Material culture is embodied, that is, religions are produced through the ways our bodies mediate between our tradition and with the divine (Morgan 2010, 16). Religion is materially mediated through the sensorium, shaping how we experience such acts as ritual practice, dress, diet, prayer, pilgrimage, purification, and penance.

Adam Yuet Chau's theorization of the sensorium as intrinsically socially productive situates the senses in a social-spatial nexus that exists beyond mere embodiment. Chau asks, "What if the body and its actions themselves are key contributors to the production of the sensory event and the effect of the sensory event is located not in the individual body but rather in the social collectivity itself?" (Chau 2008, 488). Chau expands the sensorium beyond the confines of the body by distinguishing a social sensorium as "sensorially rich social space" (Chau 2008, 489). I take Chau's definition a step further to offer a stipulative theory of what I call the religious sensorium, a symbolically rich religio-social space where ritual practitioners engage with material objects and the body to produce religious sense-experiences. In the Shiʿi context, the religious sensorium is populated with religious objects, including *ʿalams* (metal crests) and replicas (*shabih*) of tombs (*taʿziya*) and coffins (*tabut*), while the poetic and narrative accounts of Karbala elide the historical past, bringing the events of Karbala into the present.

Objects such as *taʿziyas*, *ʿalams*, and *tabuts* are visual images that stimulate acts of religious seeing for South Asian Shiʿa, which at the primary level make present the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. There is a *sense* of the individual Imams and members of the Ahl-e Bait who represent and inhabit these objects being *somewhere else*, yet they are aware of and attentive to the supplications, acts of veneration, and prayers offered by their devotees, and will intercede with God on their behalf. *Taʿziyas* and *ʿalams* are human-made images that powerfully and efficaciously communicate with South Asian Shiʿa as "image acts" (Bakewell 1998, 22). Liza Bakewell argues that images, "rather than re-present reality and therefore be largely descriptive, are more accurately categorized as actions"

(1998, 22). Images emphasize the role of visual communication and of the body as receptor of the messages these objects convey.

As image-objects, *taʿziyas* and *ʿalams* and other forms of Shiʿi materiality are resonant with *thing power*, "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 2010, 6). Jane Bennett begins her book, *Vibrant Matter*, with a vivid description of a pile of trash that collected over the grate of a storm drain: a black plastic glove, a dead rat, a bottle cap, a piece of wood, and some pollen (2010, 4). Had the sun not reflected off the glove, she would not have seen the other objects, yet "they *were* all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them" (Bennett 2010, 5). It is this very energetic vitality of things that allows for the differentiation between subject and object (human and its other), which allows us to recognize that "we *are* vital materiality" and "The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become more perceptually open to it" (Bennett 2010, 13, 14).

Drawing on the work of the postmodern, environmental, and spatial philosophical writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Bennett further develops her theory of thing power to posit metal as *the* symbol of vital materiality. The objects that comprise South Asian Shiʿi material culture – brass and silver *ʿalams*, metalwork *taʿziyas* and *jhula* cradles, and small, portable *panjahs* and Zuljanahs made of foil – are "quivering evanescence … metal, bursting with a life, that gives rise to 'the prodigious idea of Nonorganic Life'" (Bennett 2010, 55). A humming and metabolic quality is inherent in the metals used by the *ʿalam-saz* who creates a crest representing ʿAbbas, or the *taʿziya* artisan who hammers and embosses intricate designs and inscriptions in silver and other semiprecious metals to the wooden frame of the replica of Imam Husain's shrine-tomb. The artisan must feel the metal's qualities and affects and bring forth its material vitality.

As forms of Shiʿi materiality, the *taʿziya* and *ʿalam* are focal objects (Morgan 2014, 93) that promote reciprocal visual exchange. According to David Morgan, "an image is an interactive device that responds to being seen by co-creating a relation with its viewer, whose consciousness takes shape with the image in intertwining structures of feeling memory, and expectation … it is necessary to describe the things that images do, which means discussing their particular design in tandem with how they operate in assemblages that include social interactions" (2014, 87). The process of reciprocal gazing establishes objects such as *taʿziyas* and *ʿalams* as likenesses (*shabih*) of the sacred individuals that they represent. Through the act of reciprocal gazing and the transformation of the object into likeness, object becomes subject, endowed with agency to work miracles, intercede on the devotee's behalf, or to simply listen to her or his prayers and salutations.

Gazing in the Eyes of a Martyr: Embodiment and Presencing in the *ʿAlams* of Karbala Heroes

ʿAlams come in different shapes and sizes. Some are just a few inches tall and wide with minimal ornamentation, while others, such as the monumental *ʿalam* installed in the five-arched hall (*dalan*) at Hyderabad's Badshahi (royal) *ʿashurkhanah*, symbolizing the *panjetan-e pak* (the "Five Pure Ones," the Prophet Muhammad, ʿAli, Fatimah al-Zahra, Hasan and Husain), is elaborately embellished with calligraphy, cutwork, and tongue-baring dragons.

The shape and design of *ʿalams* vary considerably between Hyderabad, Lucknow, Lahore, and Karachi, as well as in the cities, towns, and villages where these standards are raised during Muharram. As the popularity of the *ʿalam* gradually spread throughout South Asia, its form, size, and the materials of its composition changed as these objects were introduced in new regions and among diverse Shiʿi, Hindu and Sufi-oriented communities (as discussed in Chapter 1). In Lahore and Lucknow, for example, an *ʿalam* in the shape of an outstretched hand called a *panjah*, representing Imam Husain's half-brother ʿAbbas, is especially popular. In Karachi and Lucknow, for example, we also see comparatively simple

rounded ʿ*alams* with one or three *jibh* (pl. *jibhiyan*, tongues) extending upward; what makes these comparatively simple standards visually striking are the richly embroidered velvet banners (*patka*) covering their supporting poles (*naʾizah*). These cloths, usually black or red, the colors of martyrdom, exhort the name of the different Karbala heroes (*ya ʿAli; ya Husain; ya ʿAbbas*); depictions of the tombs of ʿAli in Najaf, Husain and ʿAbbas in Karbala, ʿAli's sword Zulfiqar, the *mashk* (waterskin) of ʿAbbas, or Husain's horse Zuljanah are popular and beloved motifs. Other ʿ*alams*, dedicated to ʿAli or Husain, may have a sword attached to indicate their valor in battle.

Regardless of its variation in style, the ʿ*alam* is comprised of at least six different elements. It is not necessary that an ʿ*alam* possess all of these components, although certain elements are structural and required for it to be able to "stand." Other features symbolize particular moral, spiritual, and physical qualities of the individual represented by the ʿ*alam*. Taken in its totality, the ʿ*alam* is more than a mere representation of the individual that it signifies; it *becomes* the embodiment of the particular Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait that it indexes. The ʿ*alam's* indexing function and what it represents to the Shiʿa is a powerful materialization of the presence in absence of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait.

When the new moon of Muharram is sighted, throughout South Asia devotees to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait remove ʿ*alams* from their dedicated storage rooms. The ʿ*alams* are carefully given purifying baths and are then installed in the public *imambaras*, *bargahs*, ʿ*ashurkhanahs*, and *imambargahs* where Shiʿa and other devotees may come and make prayers, give offerings of incense and fruit, and have red cords (*lal nara*) tied around their wrists for protection or as part of making a vow (*mannat*). When installing an ʿ*alam*, a person uses the verb "*istadah karna*" in Urdu, meaning to erect or to stand up. There is a strongly humanizing aspect to the idea of making the ʿ*alam* "stand up." The ʿ*alam's* components are somatic through either symbolic reference or the literal use of human physiology: belly, neck, feet, hand, tongue. Writing about Iranian ʿ*alams*, Christiane Gruber's observations about their anthropomorphic qualities hold especially true for its South Asian form: "Even through the names of the ʿ*alam's*

component parts – its head (finial or crest), its body (staff or pole), and its foot (*pad*) – the standard is conceptualized in anthropomorphic terms, its humanlike qualities further 'activated' when it is set in motion by means of an ambulatory ritual" (2016a, 258).

Naʾizah

The *naʾizah* is the wooden or metal pole to which the base of the *ʿalam* is connected. The *naʾizah* is the most fundamental structural component of the *ʿalam*, without which the standard is unable to be erected for display or taken out in procession. The height and circumference of the *naʾizah* varies, depending on an *ʿalam's* size and weight. The *naʾizahs* of some *ʿalams* are extremely long, symbolizing their exalted, even royal, status.

The *naʿl-e mubarak* – blessed horseshoe – *ʿalam* in Hyderabad is a reliquary *ʿalam* containing the metal horseshoe, the *naʿl*, that fell from the hoof of Imam Husain's loyal horse Zuljanah at the battle of Karbala. This relic was given to Sultan Ibrahim Qutb Shah (r. 1550–1580) as a gift, who had it embedded in an *ʿalam* in the shape a calligraphic monogram (*tughra*) inscribed with God's name, Allah. The *ʿalam* is now covered with a thick sandalwood paste, making it impossible to see either the relic or the calligraphy underneath. The *ʿalam* was first installed at Golconda Fort and it was later shifted five miles southeast to Hyderabad by the city's founder, Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (r. 1580–1612). Beginning during the reign of Muhammad Quli, a special procession for the *naʿl-e mubarak* was taken out after midnight on *shab-e ʿashura* (the night before 10 Muharram). This procession invokes Imam Husain's status as, "*shah-e Karbala*" (the king of Karbala) through sophisticated material and ritual symbols of Indo-Iranian royalty. Unlike most *ʿalams* that are raised up on *naʾizahs* that are typically somewhat less than two meters in height, the *naʿl-e mubarak* was affixed to one that was six to eight meters in length! The *ʿalam* was accompanied by royal parasol carriers, rope bearers, and reciters of short poems of mourning to which men performed self-flagellation (*matam*). The *naʿl-e mubarak ʿalam* is evocative for demonstrating the relationship between the indexing function of

the mounting pole and the exalted status of the individual signified by the ʿ*alam*. This particular ʿ*alam's* extreme height fortifies Shiʿi cultural memory of the humiliating treatment of Imam Husain's corpse by Yazid's allies and military commanders. The *naʾizah's* height symbolizes Husain's exalted status as the *shah-e Karbala* (king of Karbala), and it also incites the traumatic memory of the Imam's severed head, carried on a spear-tip from Kufa to Damascus as a war trophy for the ʿUmayyad caliph Yazid. Carrying the *naʿl-e mubarak* on a pole of such exaggerated height is an act of historical reappropriation for the Shiʿa, who by taking this piece from their martyred Imam's horseshoe may appeal to his intercessory powers (condensed from Ruffle 2017, 339–340).

Bori

The *bori* is the tube into which the *naʾizah* is inserted. The *bori* is the weight-bearing part of the ʿ*alam*. The *bori* refers to the point of a spear or the spike on the end of a staff, again symbolically invoking the memory of Imam Husain, his half-brother ʿAbbas, and other Karbala heroes whose severed heads were brought from Kufa to Damascus mounted atop spears. Mapped onto our anatomical schemata, the *bori* is analogous to the "neck." There is an intentionality to each element that comprises the ʿ*alam* that is intended to help the Shiʿa remember the events of Karbala.

Peta

Most of the ʿ*alam's* design is comprised of what is called the *peta* (belly, girth), which is where much of its calligraphy and other decorative motifs are inscribed. Typical calligraphic inscriptions (*tughra*) found on ʿ*alams* include the name of the individual that the standard represents, the *panjetan-e pak* (the Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah, ʿAli, Hasan and Husain), Allah, and the Shiʿi statement of faith (*kalimah*). The *peta* may include fancy cutwork details to make the calligraphy stand out. Other ʿ*alam* designs, such as those found in Karachi, employ a visually stunning array of colored stones, silver, and gold polish to decorate the *peta*.

In North India and Pakistan, the *peta* may include diverse representational forms, including tomb architecture, images of Buraq, and Imam Husain's devoted horse Zuljanah. In North India and Pakistan, depictions of Imam Husain's tomb-shrine at Karbala is a popular image for *ʿalams*. The visual program inscribed on an *ʿalam* of domes and minarets, topped with a crescent and star is instantly recognizable to devotees as Husain's tomb, and it sparks Shiʿi cultural memory of Karbala. One might also encounter Buraq – the mythic creature with a donkey's body, a female head and peacock tail – the mount that carried the Prophet Muhammad on his ascent (*miʿraj*) through the seven heavens. Buraq is often connected in the Shiʿi religious imagination with Imam Husain's horse Zuljanah (see Chapter 3), which is also portrayed on *ʿalams*. These majestic steeds have otherworldly qualities and are important because of their associations with prophecy and the Imamate.

Hatheli

Integrated into the middle of the *peta* is a design called a *hatheli*, because it looks to the viewer as though the palm of the right hand has been impressed on the center of the *ʿalam*. Certainly not all *hatheli* resemble the palm of the hand; in fact, many are circular, almond- or tear-drop shaped. Significantly, the *hatheli* conforms to subcontinental and Islamic traditions of veneration, sharing obvious parallels to local practices of worshipping the foot- and handprints of the gods, the Buddha, and the Jain *jinas* (those who have attained spiritual enlightenment), as well as to the auspicious and benevolent *abhaya mudra* pose (with the right hand raised with palm showing). Such correspondences made the *ʿalam* an object through which the transcendent may be experienced through acts of worshipful hospitality (*puja*) and reciprocal gazing, known as *darśan*, which is parallel to the Shiʿi act of *nazr* or *didar*.

The inscriptional program of the *ʿalam* continues inside the *hatheli*, where the metal worker will demonstrate the extent of his faith and skill. In the small space of the *hatheli*, the *ʿalam* designer exhibits his faithful mastery of calligraphic inscription and *tughra* design by inscribing the names of the *chardah maʿsumin*

(the “Fourteen Infallibles,” the Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah al-Zahra, and the twelve Imams), the name of God, the Shiʿi prayer (*duʿa*) known as the *Nad-e ʿAli* (see Chapter 6) and the *ayat al-kursi* (The Throne Verse) attesting to incomparability of God:

> Allah! There is no god but He – the Living, the Self-Sufficient, Eternal. Slumber or sleep never reaches Him. All things are His, in the heavens and on the earth. Who is there who can plead in His presence except as He permits? He knows what (appears to His creatures), before or after or behind them. They shall not understand the smallest fragment of His knowledge except as He wills. His Throne extends over the heavens and over the earth, and He does not tire in guarding and preserving them; And He is the Most High (*al-ʿAli*), the Supreme (*al-ʿAzim*), in Glory. (2:255)

The placement of theologically instructional qurʾanic verses and talismanic prayers at the center – what we might consider the “heart” of the *ʿalam* – capture’s the devotee’s gaze. The *hatheli* is the central part of the *ʿalam*, where the eye is drawn. It is here where one might actually find actual eyes placed in the *ʿalam* to facilitate mutual acts of visual exchange between devotee and the individual the standard represents. It is only in Hyderabad and nowhere else in South Asia that I have seen *ʿalams* with eyes or the use of a calligraphic style called *musanna* (see Figure 4.01), in which that which is written on one side is mirrored on the other. Despite this unique feature of some Hyderabadi *ʿalams*, the act of visually engaging with standards is of central importance for South Asian Shiʿa in general.

In both Vedic and everyday Hindu practice, and in South Asian Islam, looking, glancing, or casting one’s eyes upon another are powerfully charged acts that can bring good or evil. According to Jan Gonda, looking is a form of touch in South Asia, and is part of what he refers to as “the language of the eyes” (1969, 4). According to Indic theories of the sensorium, human sensations do not operate in isolation, rather *contact* results “from a combination of ‘looking’ and ‘touching’. Casting one’s eyes upon a person and touching him were related activities” (Gonda 1969, 19). Muslim modes of seeing are similarly intersensorial, linking

together the tactile and visual senses to effect contact between human and divine forces.



Figure 4.01 *Musanna* calligraphy on ʿ*alam* in Badshahi ʿ*ashurkhanah*, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2015.

Approaching the ʿ*alam* in order to gaze upon it is a practice shared by Shiʿa and Hindus. For Hindus this ritual is called *darśan* and it is a reciprocal act of looking at the object that the devotee believes is embodied by a god or goddess (for example, śiva, Ganesha, Rama, Hanuman, or Lakshmi) with full intention,

devotion, and the correct invocations and offerings proffered. In his research on the consecration (*pratistha*) of Jain images in North India, John Cort describes the complex process by which the image is "brought to life" and fixed in place (*nyasa*) through a ritual by which a needle is used to place a fine line on the pupils of the image, thereby "awakening" it (2012, 73–74). Finely crushed gems outline the eyes and a monk recites a mantra inviting the *jina* ("conqueror," one of the 24 Jain *tirthankaras* who conquered all earthly desires and passions) to enter into the right ear of the statue while rubbing its body with a fragrant and costly paste made of sugar, camphor, and saffron. The *jina* receives an invitation to enter into the statue; however, it is the installation of its eyes that brings the image to life and makes it able to participate in the *darśanic* reciprocity – to see and be seen by the devotee.

Unlike the Hindu and Jain ritual of *pratistha*, by which an object is brought to life and *becomes* a *murti* in which a god or goddess inhabits the image, there is no comparable ritual for the enlivening of an *ʿalam*. This difference may be primarily attributed to the qurʾanic prohibition of *shirk*, the worship of any other than God, which I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter. Unlike a Hindu *murti*, Shiʿi *ʿalams* are neither gods nor goddesses, and while they have important representative functions and intercessory powers, these are objects to which devotees direct their love, respect, and veneration for the family members of the Prophet Muhammad, and from which they seek intercession. To some, the Islamic prohibition against invoking the name and seeking the assistance of any other being than God may seem to offer an intractable contradiction with the Shiʿi belief in the infallibility and intercessory powers of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, who are God's mediators.

Until the age of modern travel via airplane and bus, visitation (*ziyarah*) to the tombs of the Imams in Karbala, Najaf, Mashhad, and Samarra was relatively inaccessible to everyday South Asian Shiʿa. "Visiting" *ʿalams* has enabled South Asian Shiʿa to bring the distant shrines and tombs of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait located in Syria, Iraq, and Iran to local neighborhood *ʿashurkhanahs* and *imambaras* throughout India and Pakistan.

On Thursdays, during Muharram, and on other holy days in the Shiʿi calendar, men and women visit ʿ*ashurkhanahs* and *imambargahs* (buildings where mourning assemblies are held and ʿ*alams*, *taʿziyas*, and *tabuts* are displayed) to perform *nazr o niyaz* or *mannat* (supplicatory vows) to the ʿ*alam*. One approaches the ʿ*alam* with a respectful gaze, and often garlands of rose or jasmine, incense sticks, fruit, and small brocaded (*dhatti* or *chadar*) cloths or embroidered velvet banners (*patka*) are presented. In seeking the intercession of the Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait the ʿ*alam* indexes, there is a protocol regarding how one approaches the ʿ*alam* (with bare feet, head covered, and with purity of intention), the respectful comportment with which one greets and perhaps kisses the ʿ*alam*, and the humility and loving manner in which one offers prayers to the saint. Integral aspects of Shiʿi rituals of humility and respect are performed when approaching the ʿ*alam*, bowing one's head, kissing the ʿ*alam*, and taking away its *barakat* (spiritual blessing). Performing visitation, offering prayers, seeking intercession, and making vows before an ʿ*alam* are deeply personal actions that take place between the devotee and the Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait that the standard represents. The ʿ*alam* perpetuates this intimate contact between South Asian Shiʿa and the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, which is theologically reinforced in a statement about visitation and offering prayers made by the eighth Imam, Reza (d. 818): "Every Shiʿi has a contract and an understanding (ʿ*ahd*) with the imams. The visitation of the tombs of the imams is one of the best means for fulfilling and being faithful to that contract and understanding. Whoever undertakes a *ziyara* of his own free will … for him the imams will intercede with God on the day of resurrection" (quoted in Nakash 1995, 155).

The inscriptions placed in the center of the ʿ*alam* focus the gaze and convey its power. One might wonder about the role of literacy in the efficacy of an ʿ*alam*, which in a sense misses the point of the purpose of its inscriptions. Many people are illiterate or are unable to read the complex, ornamental script that decorates many ʿ*alams*, yet they are familiar with certain calligraphic forms, such as the

triangular shape of the name ʿAli, or the long vertical strokes of Allah, or the multiple roundels that comprise the Fourteen Infallibles.

Sharja

Around the outside of the ʿ*alam* are fixed metal tubes or rods, which flare out into zoomorphic (animal) figures, called the *sharja*. Common motifs are lions and dragons, although birds also make their appearance in the *sharja*. The lion symbolizes Imam ʿAli, who is affectionately known as the "lion of God" (*asad Allah or sher-e khuda*) for his bravery and chivalry. The dragon (*makara*)[3] symbolizes Zulfiqar, ʿAli's double-tongued sword. The sword originally belonged to the Prophet Muhammad and was later bequeathed to ʿAli, acquiring messianic, chivalric, and magical qualities (Alexander 1984, 105). The dragons leap from the sides of the ʿ*alam* with their mouths wide open and their tongues unfurled. The dragon's gaping jaws evoke the forked blade of Zulfiqar, and the tongues – which are often colored brilliant red – instill a sense of awe and respect for ʿAli's power (see Figures 4.02 and 4.03).

A less common *sharja* design are birds, for example the peacock (*mor*), with their necks gracefully curved so their beaks touch their backs. In Lucknow, if you pay close attention you might see a pair of fish on an ʿ*alam* with their tails and heads causing their bodies to arch out from the *peta*. Both the peacock and the fish (*mahi*) symbolize kingship and royalty. Another bird motif that appears as a *sharja* is the dove, which had an important role in the aftermath of the battle of Karbala when one drenched its wings in Imam Husain's blood and flew to Medina (discussed in Chapter 2). Once over the city, the dove released drops of the martyred Imam's blood over the residents of Medina, informing them of the tragedy that had befallen the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and family.

Jibh

Dragons and lions and other animals direct the devotee's gaze upward to the tongue-like extensions (*jibh*; pl. *jibhiyan*) that may be single or multiple. *Jibhiyan* are often five in number, referencing the *panjetan-e pak*. Sometimes the

jibh is forked to resemble ʿAli's sword Zulfiqar, making the ʿ*alam* visually rich with references to the first Imam. Many *jibh* are capped with circular calligraphic inscriptions (*tughra*), particularly for those that extend to the sides of the central tongue. Throughout South Asia, the central *jibh* is often topped with one of four symbols: 1) the name Allah; 2) the *panjah*: the outstretched right palm that variously symbolizes ʿAbbas, ʿAli, or the *panjetan-e pak*; 3) ʿAbbas's oval-shaped waterskin, commonly known as the *mashk-e Sakinah* because it was used to collect water for Husain's young daughter, whose suffering drove him to the Euphrates River on a suicidal mission to slake the children's thirst, and 4) a parasol (*chatr*), which is an Indo-Persian symbol of royalty and architectural funerary motif (see Figure 4.04).



Figure 4.02 Plaster ʿ*alam*, Charminar, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2016.



Figure 4.03 Husaini ʿ*alam*, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2015.

Case Study-Microscopic 4.1: ʿ*Alam-e Sartauq*, Hyderabad

During the battle of Karbala, Imam Husain's eldest son and his successor, Zain al-ʿAbidin, lay in his tent too sick to fight alongside his father. Following the battle, Zain al-ʿAbidin was taken together with the surviving women and children as prisoner from Kufa to the court of the ʿUmayyad caliph Yazid in Damascus. The women prisoners were forced to remove their veils (*hijab*) and rode the distance on camels without a litter,[4] causing terrible discomfort as they

had to perch themselves in front of and behind the camel's hump. Zain al-ʿAbidin was placed in a neck shackle (*tauq*) and forced to make the long walk to Damascus. Imam Zain al-ʿAbidin's sickness at Karbala saved his life, and one of his nicknames is the "*bimar-e Karbala*" (the patient of Karbala). The ʿ*alam* that is the focus of this Case Study-Microscopic is famous for its miraculous healing powers that are attributed to the "*bimar-e Karbala*" and a small piece of the neck shackle that came to Hyderabad, India more than four hundred years ago.



Figure 4.04 ʿAbbas ʿ*alam* with parasol and *mashk*, Karachi.

Photo by Mohammad Nabeel Jafri, 2019.

When Muhammad Quli, the fifth of the Qutb Shahi sultans, established Hyderabad in 1591, most of the buildings constructed in this new city had a religious function or meaning. Some had an obvious religious purpose, including the Jamiʿ *masjid* and Mecca mosque. One of the earliest buildings constructed in

Hyderabad was the Badshahi (royal) ʿ*ashurkhanah* in 1594, where ʿ*alams* (metal flags) are installed during Muharram and mourning assemblies (*majlis-e* ʿ*aza*) are held to ritually remember the events of Karbala. A more enigmatic structure is the Charminar, the symbol of Hyderabad, which was built to mark the founding of the new city. While the Charminar ("four minarets") marks the cardinal directions, it is believed to have had a talismanic function, protecting the city's residents from disease. If you look at the Charminar's shape, it resembles a *taʿziya*, a replica of Imam Husain's tomb (Ruffle 2020, 293–296). In addition to mosques, ʿ*ashurkhanah*s, and other forms of religious architecture that expressed the Shiʿi identity of the Qutb Shahi state, Muhammad Quli commissioned the construction of the Dar al-Shifaʾ hospital, an important site of faith and healing.

Dar al-Shifaʾ ("the place of cure") was built near the eastern bank of the Musi River so that the hospital's residents could benefit from the fresh breezes blowing off its waters. The hospital was built in a large square (175' x 175') over two floors where patients came for treatment. It was also the site of the Unani medical college.[5] When Muhammad Quli built the hospital, it was free for the city's residents. By the reign of the seventh sultan, ʿAbdullah (r. 1626–72), Dar al-Shifaʾ had developed a reputation as a place of miraculous healing. A man named Agha Mohsen Khorasani traveled to Syria and discovered a piece of the iron shackle (*tauq*) that had been placed around Zain al-ʿAbidin's neck when he was taken prisoner from Kufa to the ʿUmayyad caliph Yazid's court in Damascus. In what follows, I translate the royal edict (*farman*) issued by the Mughal emperor ʿAurangzeb declaring an order of protection and support for the healing ʿ*alam*:

> Emperor ʿAlamgir (ʿAurangzeb) issued a command closing all ʿ*ashurkhanahs* and the like, unless wondrous acts (*muʿjizah*) and divine miracles (*karamat*) were witnessed. Mirza Hashmat ʿAli Khan Beg petitioned ʿAurangzeb regarding this relic (*tabarruk*), which had been brought by Agha Mohsen Khorasani from Syria to Hyderabad and was duly ordered to be preserved in an ʿ*alam* and erected in Chowk. In time it was decreed that the sacred reliquary ʿ*alam* be erected in the royal hospital (Dar al-Shifaʾ) in order to cure all sick people. [Hearing this], ʿAurangzeb issued a *farman* (decree) establishing Mirza Hashmat ʿAli Beg as custodian (*mawla*). He was assigned two *huns* per day for incense (ʿ*ud*) and flowers (*gul*) for the ʿ*ashurkhanah*.
>
> Source: Translated from Rahat ʿAzmi, "Haidarabad ke muqaddas tabarrukat" [Hyderabad's sacred relics,] in *Haidarabad ki ʿazadari*, ed. Syed Taqi Hasan Wafa (Hyderabad: Mahnama Sada-ye Jaʿfariyya, 1978), 44.

Agha Mohsen Khorasani came into possession of this lost relic recalling Imam Zain al-ʿAbidin's imprisonment and brought it as a gift for Sultan ʿAbdullah Qutb Shah. In South Asia, Shiʿi relics, that is, objects that belonged to or are associated with the Imams or Ahl-e Bait, have generally been made publicly available for the benefit of devotees. This is done in a number of ways. One way is through the creation of what I describe as "reliquary ʿ*alams*." A "reliquary ʿ*alam*" is a metal flag or standard into which an object associated with a Shiʿi Imam or member of the Prophet Muhammad's family has been embedded. Another way is through the relics' public display and, on set dates in the ritual calendar, public procession. Many ʿ*ashurkhanah*s in Hyderabad, for example, are in possession of large numbers of Shiʿi relics that are publicly displayed on ritually significant days of the year. These relics are usually enumerated on signboards outside of ʿ*ashurkhanah*s with the dates and times when each is made available for the public to view and seek its intercessory powers. Figure 4.05 is of a signboard painted on the storeroom for the relics of the Qutb Shahi ʿ*ashurkhanah* located just outside of Golconda Fort in Hyderabad. The sign

attests to the antiquity of the ʿ*ashurkhanah* and its numerous relics associated with the Kaʿba, Imam ʿAli, and the Prophet Muhammad.



Figure 4.05 Signboard at the Qutb Shahi ʿ*ashurkhanah* listing its relics, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2015.

The ʿ*alam-e sartauq* is unusual because it is kept on display throughout the year; most ʿ*alams* in South Asia are only installed during the ten days of Muharram. On ʿ*ashura*, while men participate in the massive procession (*julus*) that makes its way through the Old City, the Alava-e Sartauq Mubarak ʿ*ashurkhanah* is reserved only for women to come make their offerings to the reliquary ʿ*alam* dedicated to Zain al-ʿAbidin (see Figure 4.06).

When I was conducting dissertation research in 2005, I used to frequently visit the Jaʿfari Library, located on the grounds of the Alava-e Sartauq Mubarak ʿ*ashurkhanah*. I often paid my respects to the ʿ*alam-e sartauq* following my visit to the Jaʿfari Library. The Alava-e Sartauq Mubarak ʿ*ashurkhanah* is built in the large courtyard on the Dar al-Shifaʾ Hospital, and it stands to reason that the

ʿ*alam* representing the “patient of Karbala” remains installed throughout the year. Women make *mannats* (vows) seeking Zain al-ʿAbidin’s intercession for a loved-one who is ill, and old women in poor health sit at the threshold to the hospital’s gates seeking a few coins and the curative atmosphere that radiates out from the ʿ*alam*. Although the Dar al-Shifaʾ ceased operating as a hospital long ago, it continues to be a place of healing for Shiʿa.



Figure 4.06 ʿ*Alam-e Sartauq*, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2006.

Case Study-Microscopic 4.2: The ʿ*Alam* of Imam Husain at Dargah Hazrat ʿAbbas, Lucknow

How the principal ʿ*alam* came to be enshrined in the Dargah Hazrat ʿAbbas in the North Indian city of Lucknow tells the story of a “lost-found” relic that was

recovered through Abbas's miraculous dreamtime intervention. This dream and recovery of Husain's crest happened to a pious Lakhnavi Shiʿi man while he was on pilgrimage in Mecca, sometime during the reign of the Nawab of Awadh Asaf al-Daulah (r. 1775–1797). He promptly left for Karbala when ʿAbbas appeared to him in a dream instructing him to dig for the crest belonging to Husain under the protection of night. The pilgrim found the crest and was instructed by ʿAbbas to tell no one of his discovery and to return to Lucknow, where he presented the relic to Nawab Asaf al-Daulah. A few decades after this event took place, a British woman married to a local Shiʿi man, Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAli, described the acquisition of the relic and its arrival in India, shrouded in secrecy.[6]

A native of India – I forget his name – remarkable for his devotion and holy life, undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca; whilst engaged in these duties at the "holy house,"[7] he was visited with a prophetic dream. Abass Ali[8] (the standard-bearer and relation of Hosein) appeared to him in a dream, commanding him, that as soon as his duties at Mecca were fulfilled he should, without delay, proceed to Kraabaallah,[9] to the tomb of Hosein; directing him with great precision, how he was to find the exact spot of earth where was deposited the very Allum[10] (banner) of Hosein, which he (Abass Ali) had, on the great day of Kraabaallah, carried to the field. The man was further instructed to possess himself of this relic secretly, and convey it about his person until he should reach his native country, when he would be more fully directed by the orderings of Providence how the relic should be disposed of.

The Hadjee[11] followed all the injunctions he had received punctually; the exact spot was easily discovered, by the impressions from his dream; and, fearing the jealousy of the impressions from his dream; and, fearing the jealousy of the Arabs, he used the utmost precaution, working by night, to secure to himself the possession of so inestimable a prize, without exciting their suspicion, or attracting the notice of the numerous pilgrims who thronged the shrine by day. After several nights of severe labour he discovered, to his great joy, the metal crest of the banner; and concluding the banner and staff to have mouldered away, from having been long entombed in the earth, he cautiously secreted the crest about his person, and after enduring the many vicissitudes and privations, attendant on the long journey from Arabia to India, he finally succeeded in reaching Lucknow in safety with his prize.

Source: Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAli, *Observations on the Mussalmauns of India: Descriptive of Their Manners, Customs, Habits, and Religious Opinions, Made during a Twelve Years' Residence in Their Immediate Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1917), 32–33.

Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAli tells us a remarkable account of how ʿAbbas's ʿ*alam* was discovered by a pious Indian pilgrim who brought it back to Lucknow as a royal gift for the Nawab of Awadh, Asaf al-Daulah (r. 1775–1797). While in Mecca, the *hajji* was visited by ʿAbbas in a dream, instructing him to go at once to Karbala to recover the metal standard that he carried into battle. The ʿAbbas ʿ*alam* follows a general pattern of what I call a "reliquary script" to describe the formulaic manner in which Shiʿi relics are simultaneously "discovered" and "recovered" by pious individuals who have been chosen by the Imams or Ahl-e Bait.

Dreams play an important role in the acquisition of relics and discovery of hand- and footprints set in stone (*qadam-sharif*). It is the recurrence of dreams, the miraculous recovery of "lost/found" objects associated with the Imams and *Ahl-e Bait*, and their conferral upon royal heirs that I have come to identify as a reliquary script. Dreams are a recurring trope for explaining how relics were found buried in the sand in Karbala or hidden in Mecca, their discovery one of divine validation. These relics are hidden gifts that may only be found by the "right person."

Pilgrims returning from Karbala, Mecca, and Medina brought most of these relics. The men who brought them were merely intermediaries for the delivery of these divine gifts, hence, the formulaic, scripted manner in which they were "discovered," "recovered," and restored to their rightful owners and heirs. This "reliquary script" involves a necessary double-step of discovery-in-dreamtime and repatriation through the intermediary of the relic to its royal heir.

Source: Shortened version of discussion of reliquary scripts as appears in Karen G. Ruffle, "Presence in Absence: The Formation of Reliquary Shiʿism in Qutb Shahi Hyderabad," *Material Religion* 13, no. 3 (2017): 337.

Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAli's account conforms to the framework for the Shiʿi reliquary script. We are told that the *hajji* experienced a "prophetic dream" while

he was in Mecca, in which ʿAbbas came to him and instructed him to go to the tomb of Imam Husain in Karbala at once. Next, ʿAbbas instructed the *hajji* to locate the exact spot where the ʿ*alam* that he carried into the battle of Karbala lay buried beneath the sand. The *hajji* was further directed to search for this relic with the utmost secrecy, lest its discovery inflame the jealousy of other pilgrims or the local Arabs, or worse, it be discovered by the wrong person. The *hajji* received instructions to take the ʿ*alam* back to India and present it to Asaf al-Daulah, the Nawab of Awadh in Lucknow, which he did. Asaf al-Daulah received the relic and was greatly touched by the *hajji's* account of its miraculous "discovery" in dreamtime, and of his stealthy recovery of the ʿ*alam* from Karbala's soil. The Nawab appointed the *hajji* as the custodian (*mujavir*) of the ʿ*alam* and commissioned the construction of a shrine (*dargah*) to house it in Lucknow, which later came to be known as the Hazrat ʿAbbas Dargah.

When the Dargah was rebuilt during the reign of Nawab Saʿadat ʿAli Khan (r. 1798–1814), the ʿ*alam* assumed a high degree of ritual authority during Muharram. According to two nineteenth-century foreign observers of life in Lucknow, Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAli and William Knighton, beginning on the morning of 5 Muharram people of all social classes would make their way to the Hazrat ʿAbbas Dargah. People came atop elephants, on horseback, and by foot, carrying banners of all designs. The banners of the wealthy were made of brightly coloured silks, edged with gold or silver fringe, and the flags of the poor ranged from "tinsel imitations down to dyed muslin" (ʿAli 1917, 21–22). These banners (*parcham* and *jhanda*) were erected on tall poles (*naʾizah*), and many were inscribed with the names of Imam Husain, ʿAbbas, Sakinah, ʿAli, Fatimah, Imam Husain's horse, Zuljanah, or a waterskin (*mashk-e Sakinah*).

During the course of the day on 5 Muharram, upwards of 50 000 banners were brought to the Hazrat ʿAbbas Dargah to be blessed in front of the ʿAbbas ʿ*alam*. Offerings were made by the ritual practitioners to the Dargah in respect for Imam Husain. The procession of the banners was inclusive of all people, regardless of wealth or rank, however, Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAli did observe that "those persons who make the most costly exhibitions enjoy the greatest share of popular favour,

as it is considered proof of their desire to do honour to the memory of Hosein and Hasan, their venerated Emaums”[12] (ʿAli 1917, 36). The banners described in the nineteenth century by Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAli and William Knighton were bright and colorful; today they tend to be either black or green. Black symbolizes the color of mourning and green is the color of Imam Husain and the Prophet Muhammad. Red banners are not carried during Muharram, as this is the color of Imam Husain’s enemy, the ʿUmayyad caliph Yazid.

The practice of taking banners to the Hazrat ʿAbbas Dargah for blessing marks the beginning of the intensification of ritual activity during Muharram in Lucknow. This action requires the direct involvement of both ʿAbbas and Imam Husain. Devotees carry their family or Muharram association banners before the hand-shaped (*panjah*) ʿ*alam* of ʿAbbas, touching it, after which they make their departure. The action of the banners making their entrance into the inner courtyard of the Dargah, bowing down before ʿAbbas’s *panjah*, and then respectfully retreating replicates the strict etiquette demanded when approaching royalty. In the symbolic world of South Asian Shiʿism, the Imams and Ahl-e Bait are saints, role models, and because they carry the blood of the family of the Prophet Muhammad and his daughter Fatimah al-Zahra, they are like royalty.

Taʿziya: Karbala on the Move in South Asia

On my first trip to India in 1997, I traveled to Lucknow and spent considerable time visiting the city’s *imambaras*. I was enchanted by the vastness of the Bara (Great) Imambara’s interior with its pistachio green walls and arches with finely worked filigree that reminded me of spun sugar. Glancing upwards, you will see a beautiful yet simple ornamental vaulted ceiling, which is an Islamic architectural technique called *muqarnas*. I did not know any of this as a 23-year-old, just that the *imambara* was beautiful. The simplicity of the building’s design drew me to the interior arched recesses where ʿ*alams* and *taʿziyas* are displayed. Looking at flanks of ʿ*alams* adorned with red or green cloths standing at an angle so they point toward the *taʿziya* both intrigued and moved me. I thought, why does it seem that these metal objects are “looking over” this building with such

protective and sad posture, like a person mourning (see Figure 4.07)? I had spent the past four years of my undergraduate degree devoting myself to the study of Shiʿism, increasingly focusing my interest in South Asia, yet so much of what I had learned up to that point had been “academic.” I had no clue about the significance of a *taʿziya* or the depth of meaning and representational power of the ʿ*alam* for South Asian Shiʿa, and it would take me years of observing and participating in everyday religious life before I would begin to learn. Like the ʿ*alam*, the *taʿziya* is another form of material devotion that reflects the ways in which Shiʿa have integrated cultural memory of Karbala, the Imams, and Ahl-e Bait into broader subcontinental grammars of tradition.



Figure 4.07 *Taʿziya* in the Bara Imambara, Lucknow.

Photo by author, 1997.

According to tradition, the *taʿziya* was brought to India by Timur, the Turco-Mongol founder of the Timurid dynasty. In 1398, Timur invaded northern India, and according to legend, he brought with him a portable replica of Imam Husain's tomb at Karbala. When Timur sacked Baghdad in 1400, he refrained from causing any damage to the Shiʿi shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, and he dedicated gifts of money to the shrines' upkeep. Some have taken this to mean that Timur converted to Shiʿism and became an ardent devotee:

> While in Iraq Timur converted to Shiʿism and became so deeply and emotionally attached to the area around Karbala that he would not move his troops from that spot. In order to deal with this situation, the *ʿulama* of the region built a replica of the tomb which he could take with him out of the dust and clay of that place. It is reported that nightly sounds of mourning and lamentation could be heard arising from the models. It was this *taʿziya* which was brought to India by Timur during his invasion.
>
> (Schubel 1993, 110)

While an interesting origins narrative, its historical veracity is questionable; its content serves a religious goal to explain how and when the *taʿziya* was brought to India in its particular form. What makes this account so problematic, despite its ubiquity, is that we have precious little in the historical record to corroborate this chain of events. Nor do we find a description of Timur bringing the *taʿziya* in his purported memoir, the *Tuzuk-e Timuri* (The institutes of Timur), which proved to be written well after his life, although many details are historically accurate. Further complicating the possibility of Timur introducing the *taʿziya* to India is the fact that after he sacked Delhi in 1398, he neither remained in the region nor did he appoint an administrator to oversee the defeated territories. It makes little sense that he would return to India at a later point with *taʿziya* or other religious objects. In the following section, I examine historical evidence and offer snapshots of religious practice to unpack the explicitly South Asian form and meaning of the *taʿziya*.

Whether Timur actually introduced the *taʿziya* to India or not, this legend has endured through the centuries. It is more plausible to posit that the *taʿziya* and similar portable structures were introduced in different regions of the subcontinent by different Shiʿi communities at a number of historical moments. As representations of Imam Husain's tomb at Karbala, *taʿziya* are the primary devotional object around which Muharram processions take place in South Asia, and they take radically different form throughout the subcontinent. In the Deccan, *taʿziya* are largely absent, with preference given to the *ʿalam* by Shiʿa and other devotees of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait.

We see from this account that while Timur was in Iraq he visited the shrines of Imam ʿAli in Najaf and Imam Husain in Karbala, which purportedly inspired him to convert from being a Sunni to a Shiʿa. Timur was so enthralled with these holy precincts that he refused to leave, which caused consternation amongst the local religious scholars. The *ʿulama* had seen the havoc wrought by Timur when he sacked Baghdad during his campaign of conquest across Asia, and despite any claim of conversion, his ongoing presence in the region would have certainly been cause for alarm.

This origin story explains several features of the South Asian *taʿziya*. Timur's *taʿziya* was constructed from the "dust and clay" of Karbala. It functions as an *aide mémoire* for South Asian Shiʿa who live geographically distant from Iraq. The dust of Karbala and Najaf is sacred and endowed with healing powers. The *taʿziya* is a "likeness" of Imam Husain's tomb, which incites collective memory of Husain's martyrdom on the battlefield of Karbala. Many *taʿziya* in no way resemble Husain's Karbala tomb, and some explicitly engage the aesthetics and form of Hindu temple architecture and Sufi *dargahs* (Abbas 2007). Like other forms of South Asian Shiʿi material culture, the ritual purpose of the *taʿziya* is translocative; to affect a dual movement of Karbala into a South Asian milieu, and to transport devotees into the presence of the Imam.

The *taʿziya* is but one element in the Shiʿi repertoire of items that serves as a material symbol of Imam Husain and the battle of Karbala. *Taʿziyas* conform to what Elizabeth Lambourn refers to as a broader system of South Asian "micro-architecture" (2010, 121). If we consider the *taʿziya* as a form of Indo-Shiʿi micro-architecture, its status as a "foreign" ritual object is diminished and we are better able to examine this portable tomb of Imam Husain from a different perspective. As Lambourn argues, "such a fundamental principle of Indic architectural design should also be translated into South Asia's Islamic religious architecture, part of the long dialogue between the ritual needs of Muslims and regional traditions of architectural design" (2010, 124).

Taʿziya take two principal forms in South Asia: ephemeral and permanent. The relative permanence of a *taʿziya* is associated with systems of patronage and the

financial means of ritual practitioners. Artisans developed a vast repertoire of skills that they were able to adapt to the construction of Shiʿi *taʿziya* or Hindu gods and goddesses, both of which were taken out in procession and then ritually "cooled" (*thanda karna*) through burial or immersion in a body of water in an act called *visarjan*.

Ephemeral *Taʿziya*

This type of *taʿziya* is generally associated with the household or neighborhood, and it is intended for burial in the local *karbala* on *ʿashura*. As a type of "architecture of ephemerality" (Shaffer 2017, 4), artisans construct these *taʿziya* on bamboo frames covered with brightly colored paper, talc, mica, and silver and gold tinsel. Some especially beautiful (and fragrant) *taʿziya* are created entirely of flowers, including roses, marigolds, and jasmine. Ephemeral *taʿziya* range in size; some might weigh a couple of pounds and easily fit in both hands, and others may weigh tons and span multiple stories. As far as what architectural features may be included on a *taʿziya*, there are no limitations; it may include minarets, lights, lofty domes, even the spire (*shikhara*) of a Hindu temple. Particularly innovative *taʿziyas* have domes or other architectural elements that rotate to add visual interest and draw attention to the creativity and skill of the *taʿziya* artisans. Certainly, extraordinary amounts of money and time can be spent by devotees on the construction of a temporary *taʿziya* that will be displayed for the *ʿashra* (the rituals of the first through tenth) of Muharram, taken on procession on the tenth, and buried at the local *karbala* ground in order to release Imam Husain's body from its "tomb" until next year.

Permanent *Taʿziya*

One might find permanent *taʿziya* in the domestic *imambaras* of élite families in North India and those who migrated (*muhajir*) to Pakistan after Partition in 1947. Such *taʿziya* are made of more durable and expensive materials, including wood, silver, gold, ivory, glass, and brass. These *taʿziya* are often inlaid with semi-precious stones and feature ornate metalwork and other designs. They are displayed in special rooms in the house and do not go out in procession on

ʿ*ashura*. The family will instead commission the creation of an ephemeral *taʿziya* for display, procession, and burial. In addition to this domestic type, there are other forms of permanent *taʿziya*, including those displayed in *imambaras* and monumental tombs that are carried in procession every Muharram. Multan and Chiniot in Pakistan's Panjab region are particularly famous for grand-scale wood-carved *taʿziyas* that have been a focal point of these cities' complex religious landscape since the nineteenth century (Lyons 2015, 224).

Case Study-Snapshot 4.3: Permanent *Taʿziya*: Seeing, Embodying, and Making Imam Husain Close

Permanent *taʿziya*, often comprised of a wooden frame covered with intricately hammered metalwork, are not buried or disposed of in a local *karbala* ground on ʿ*ashura*. Technically, this form of *taʿziya* is known as a *zarih*, because its durability, size and permanence more powerfully resemble the silver, gold, and brass latticework enclosure around Imam Husain's grave at his shrine-tomb in Karbala, although in local practice, people refer to these objects as *taʿziya*. Despite what these objects most closely resemble, their sheer size – such as the *taʿziya* of the Shadi Malang Imambara in Chiniot, which measures up to 42 feet in height, weighs 1½ tons, and must be carried by 16 men in procession – draws a more direct association between the Imam and his shrine-tomb in Karbala (Miraj 2011).

Permanent *taʿziyas* are similar to ʿ*alams* in their representational power, particularly their ability to affect a sense of intimacy between the devotee and the Imams and Ahl-e Bait; their grand scale is particularly effective in display and procession for enabling visual exchange. Like the ʿ*alam*, the *taʿziya* brings the devotee into close proximity with Imam Husain. During Muharram, the *taʿziya* becomes Imam Husain's body (Hjortshoj 1977, 141). The *taʿziya* makes Imam Husain immediate and present. The influential twentieth-century Shiʿi *mujtahid* Sayyid ʿAli Naqi Naqvi, popularly known as "Naqqan Sahib," eloquently explains *taʿziyas* as symbolic forms of attachment to Imam Husain for devotees:

> It is an undeniable phenomenon that love always flows in the direction of its object; and if the object, for one reason or the other, happens to be beyond its reach, it contends itself even with an Image of the object it cherishes. Thus, when the devotee of God, His Prophet, and his progeny, find themselves unable to go the shrines of the latter, their urge for expression of their inner longing makes them resort to substitute forms of satisfaction.
>
> (Naqvi 1974, 133)

The *taʿziya* collapses the distance between the subcontinent and Karbala; the gap between the Imam Husain and his devotee is narrowed to the love one feels in the heart.

Ghulam Abbas, a Pakistani scholar of Chiniot *taʿziyas* and Muslim visual culture, describes the overwhelming power of love (*ʿishq*) as a motivating force for those who construct these tomb structures. He aptly makes the connection between the *taʿziya* and its personification of Imam Husain, which lies in tension with Islamic legal (*shariʿa*) prohibitions against figural representation. This is dramatically illustrated in a conversation he had in 2004 with a Sunni *taʿziya* maker who declared: "Who told you there is any connection between *tazia* and *Sharia*. It is difficult to make you understand as it's all about *ishq* (love). *Tazia* is our *ishq* with Husain and *ishq* has nothing to do with *Sharia*. Always remember! *ishq* begins where *Sharia* ends. Today, if Husain were reappearing to us and say, abandon the *tazia* practices; we would not accept him because now we have become engrossed into it that to us '*tazia*' is 'Husain'" (Abbas 2017, 2–3).

In his series of short essays anthologized in the Urdu literary journal *Dil gudaz* from 1913 and for a number of years following, and later published in English as *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, ʿAbdul Halim Sharar describes aspects of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Lucknow under the reign of the Shiʿi Nawabs of Awadh. Sharar's *Lucknow* is a valuable source of information about many topics, particularly Shiʿi religious practice, including Muharram. Sharar recounts a late-night experience on *chehlum*[13] at the Talkatora *Karbala* shrine. He writes that he was passing this night of mourning with some

friends in a tent, when they were awakened around two in the morning by a sound. Sharar and his friends left the tent to find out the source of the noise, and in the moonlight they saw a procession of bareheaded women carrying paperwork *taʿziyas*. As one woman carried a single candle, the others sang a poem of mourning:

When the caravan of Medina, having lost all

Arrived captive in the vicinity of Sham [Damascus]

Foremost came the head of Husain, borne aloft on a spear

And in its wake, a band of women, with heads bared.

(Sharar 1989, 149–150)

Most intriguing is Sharar's response to this scene of the bareheaded women, the mournful poetry, and their *taʿziya* procession: "This elegy, so suitable to the occasion, made one wonder whether through this verse the lady was describing the present mourning procession entering the Kerbala, or whether she was referring to the historic procession of Husain's family" (1989, 150). The *taʿziya* procession of women walking bareheaded to the *karbala*, along with Sharar and his companions who witnessed this act, experienced the collapse of time and space in which the aftermath of the battle of Karbala was transposed onto the darkened Talkatora grounds and the women were transformed into the female captives embarking on the forced march from Kufa to Damascus with Imam Husain's head.

While the previous example drew on an ephemeral *taʿziya*, it demonstrates the ways in which tomb replicas enact proximity between devotees living in the present and Imam Husain. If the *taʿziya* is an embodiment of Imam Husain during Muharram, it stands to reason that the procession of permanent tomb replicas can be a fraught endeavor. The size and weight of permanent *taʿziyas* make them difficult to carry. Large numbers of men volunteer to carry the *taʿziya*, and many do so year after year in spite of the physical toll carrying such heavy weights wreaks on one's back and neck. Such service in the name of the

Imam is an act of faith (Miraj 2011). These volunteers must also contend with large crowds, and there is always the danger that a portion of the *taʿziya* might become damaged. In Figure 4.08 we see a *taʿziya* that was carried in the 2019 Muharram procession (*julus*) in Karachi, which is clearly quite heavy for its bearers to carry long distances. The *taʿziya* has legs that rest on "feet" so that its carriers may set it down without it tipping over or risking other damage while out on the lengthy procession route.

If a permanent *taʿziya* becomes damaged beyond repair, it is called a martyr (*shahid*) and must be given a proper burial in a cemetery (Lyons 2015, 223). Those *taʿziyas* that are subjected to damages and can be repaired are called "partial" martyrs, and are rehabilitated. Such a *taʿziya* may not be strong enough to go out in procession in future Muharram processions, so it will be put on display.

According to Tryna Lyons, "because the object is in some sense personified as a victim of the Karbala debacle, a *taʿziya's* dome (representing its head) is the particular target of ill-wishers" (2015, 223). Destruction of the *taʿziya's* "head" aligns with iconoclastic practices in South Asia and the broader Islamic world, where, as Finbarr Barry Flood has observed, "'destruction' in medieval Islamic texts could meaningfully refer to transformations of buildings and objects that fell far short of physical obliteration. When motivated by iconoclasm, such transformations are consistently focused on the head and face" (Flood 2002, 647). An object becomes something else, even discharged of its *thing power*, when its face or head is neutralized through decapitation, gouging eyes, or other acts of anthropomorphized mutilation.



Figure 4.08 *Taʿziya* in Muharram procession, Karachi.

Photo by Mohammad Nabeel Jafri, 2019.

The size of the permanent *taʿziya* facilitates closeness to Imam Husain through visual exchange. This emphasis in everyday Shiʿism on the visual is part of a larger South Asian grammar of religious tradition that David Pinault has termed the "*darshanic*" (2001, 17–18), in which "auspicious sight" brings a devotee into the presence of a deity or saint to see and be seen (Eck 1998, 3). The elaborate ornamentation and size of permanent *taʿziya* (and the use of shiny materials and bright colors in the case of ephemeral tomb replicas) facilitate the gaze, as we see in Figure 4.09 of a Karachi *taʿziya*. The *taʿziya's* dome is decorated with

lacquerware roses and the names of the Imams inscribed in roundels with a green background. At the bottom of the *taʿziya* are pictorial representations of the *ʿatabat-e ʿaliyat*, and floral garlands and artificial flowers festoon the brightly lit structure.



Figure 4.09 *Taʿziya* in Karachi *imambara*.

Photo by Mohammad Nabeel Jafri, 2019.

As previously discussed in the section about *ʿalams*, closeness and the ability to seek intercession from the Imam or Ahl-e Bait is enacted through visual exchange. Indian theories of the senses are explicitly intersensorial, meaning no

single sense is experienced in isolation. It is posited that the vision of something acquires form when the eye sighting it touches it. Seeing "is a going forth of the sight towards the object … Touch is the ultimate connection by which the visible yields to being grasped" (Kramrisch 1976, quoted in Eck 1998, 9). The *darśanic* gaze – the act of *nazr* or *didar* for Shiʿa – makes Imam Husain and other members of the Ahl-e Bait present and physically immediate; as such it requires purity of heart and intention (*niyyah*). The act of gazing is another expression of love and loyalty.

Zuljanah: Remembering Karbala with Imam Husain's Loyal Horse

The white stallion Imam Husain rode in battle is a central part of ʿ*ashura* processions throughout North India and Pakistan. As discussed in Chapter 2, Zuljanah loyally remained with Husain during the battle of Karbala and was a witness to his death. During the fighting, Zuljanah protected his master by rising up on his hooves and violently pawing at the enemy. It was only after the Imam was murdered that Zuljanah returned to the women's encampment, with arrows riddling his body and smeared with Husain's blood, to non-verbally deliver his message of Husain's martyrdom. This image of Zuljanah is grief-inducing and it instills feelings of tremendous love and affection for the horse in South Asian Shiʿism. Zuljanah's conduct, likewise, imparts deep spiritual lessons about the value of loyalty (*vafadari*) to the Ahl-e Bait and remaining true to the teachings of Islam.

In South Asian Muharram processions, a white horse typically represents Zuljanah. White horses symbolize kingship and in South Asia the Imams and Ahl-e Bait are often portrayed as spiritual royalty. The royal imagery of Zuljanah is further amplified by the turban or parasol (*chatr*) that is placed on the horse's back. The parasol is an Indic symbol of kingship that has been extensively integrated into Shiʿi devotional representations of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait; the exalted status of certain ʿ*alams* in Hyderabad, for example, is indicated by the inclusion of a parasol. Interestingly, I have only ever seen one Zuljanah ʿ*alam* in

Hyderabad, which is displayed at the ʿAshurkhanah wa Masjid-e Ahl-e Bait, which I presented as a case study in Chapter 3. This ʿ*alam* was brought to Hyderabad by Mirza Asadullah Baig from Lucknow (see Figure 4.10).



Figure 4.10 Zuljanah ʿ*alam*, ʿAshurkhanah wa Masjid-e Ahl-e Bait, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2006.

In processions, a horse representing Zuljanah is draped in a saddlecloth with heavy embroidery and made to appear as if its body has been riddled with arrows. Sometimes, a dove or pigeon is affixed to the empty saddle on Zuljanah's back to symbolize the bird that doused its wings in Husain's blood before flying

to Medina to spread the message of martyrdom. Other items that accompany Zuljanah are martial ornaments covered with silver-plate, including the horse bridle, empty crowns or turbans, swords, arrows, and quiver, which can be seen in Figure 4.11.



Figure 4.11 Zuljanah in a Karachi Muharram procession.

Photo by Mohammad Nabeel Jafri, 2019.

A horse that is selected to be Zuljanah holds a very special status in the local Shiʿi community. Once a horse has been selected to be a Zuljanah for Muharram processions, it will serve in this representative role as long as it is able – sometimes for several decades. This, of course, is the ideal; it is easier in cities or if there is a wealthy patron to permanently elevate the horse's status to represent Zuljanah throughout the year. Oftentimes in rural areas, horses are required for agricultural labor during the year outside of Muharram.

Lahore's Zuljanah procession is a two-day event, beginning on the ninth at Nisar Haveli and concluding on ʿ*ashura* at the *karbala* Gamay Shah. As the procession winds its way through the city, upwards of 50 000 people participate and gather to view the auspicious representation of Zuljanah. The procession is crowded and devotees jostle and struggle to get close to Zuljanah in order to kiss his body. Devotees offer prayers to the horse and make supplicatory vows (*mannat*). Red threads (*lal nara*) are thrust against Zuljanah's body, which are tied around the wrist to channel the horse's *barakat* and to receive his protection. In fulfillment of a vow, children are sometimes thrust under and between Zuljanah's legs. Such acts are performed after a child has been cured of an illness or other malady. Gold and jewels are also given to Zuljanah in fulfillment of a vow, which is used to care for the poor (see Frembgen 2012, 180–182). These processions are slow-moving because of the many offerings that are bestowed on Zuljanah, as well as the physical acts of fulfilling *mannats* with children passing between the horse's legs. The Zuljanah procession reveals another dimension of mutual visual exchange. While making its way through the city, the Zuljanah is stopped at each of the important *imambaras* to be seen and to "see" the ʿ*alams* and *taʿziyas* on display – a repeated and extended act of auspicious visual exchange between the myriad representations of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait.

In South Asia, figural representation of Muharram and Karbala are represented by Zuljanah. In Pakistan, Zuljanah replicas are made of wood or even cloth and are pulled in Muharram processions on wheels, which we can see in Figures 4.12 and 4.13.

With the rise of inexpensive, mass-produced color lithography in South Asia, Imam Husain's white horse emerged as the imagistic reference to Shiʿism *par excellence*. While referring to the battle of Karbala in seventh-century Iraq, the depictions of Zuljanah on these lithographed posters are explicitly Indian. In some posters, Karbala's desert landscape is transformed into lush greenery with Indian shrine architecture in the background. In others, the Karbala desert and encampment is foregrounded with Zuljanah, while Egyptian pyramids and Imam Husain's shrine-tomb sit incongruously in the background. The historian Sandria

Freitag has observed the ways representations of Zuljanah in devotional posters have changed in the past century. Whereas earlier portrayals emphasized the Imam's horse as a representative of the human martyrs and as a symbol of the Shiʿi concept of just rule, later in the twentieth century Zuljanah posters began to convey two sets of meanings to Shiʿa. The first is a continuation of the earlier message of martyrdom, while the second is the development of Zuljanah as a "royal representation" (Freitag 2007, 309). Husain's royal status is symbolized in these posters by a *panjah*, the extended hand representing the "holy five," or the parasol, another sign of the Imam's sovereignty. Kingship and its connection to the Imamate in South Asia is important to consider because it further emplaces Shiʿism and traditional notions of authority and leadership within localized Muslim and Indic systems of just rule. Devotional posters of Zuljanah serve an additional theological function in North India and Pakistan, where animal representations are less likely to cause sectarian tension and debate regarding the permissibility of figural portraiture.



Figure 4.12 Old Zuljanah made of cloth, Karachi.

Photo by Mohammad Nabeel Jafri, 2019.



Figure 4.13 Wooden Zuljanah, Karachi.

Photo by Mohammad Nabeel Jafri, 2019.

Debating Devotional Representations of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait

The qurʾanic prohibition against the association of any being or thing with God, which is known as *shirk*, is considered by Muslims to be the greatest of sins. There are numerous verses in the Qurʾan warning Muslims against associating or worshipping any thing or being other than God, otherwise the torments of Hell await after the Day of Judgment (*yawm-e din*). It has been easy for reformist South Asian Muslim groups such as the Sunni Deoband, Ahl-e Hadith, Tablighi

Jamaʿat and the Taliban to invoke their own normativizing discourses that label Shiʿi venerative practices with the charged accusations of polytheistic "idol worship" (*shirk*) and religious innovation (*bidʿah*). Such rhetoric has created internal Muslim "others," polarizing and inflaming sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shiʿa in places such as Lucknow, Mumbai, and Karachi during the colonial and post-Partition periods in South Asia. An assessment of how debates regarding the use of religious objects in Muharram ritual between Sunni and Shiʿi groups lies beyond the scope of this discussion of everyday practice, although it is necessary to briefly consider intra-community attitudes regarding devotional replicas and images in South Asia.

The criticism that has been leveled against the Shiʿa, both from within the community and by external observers, is that the veneration of ʿ*alams*, *taʿziya*, and other devotional replicas (*shabih*) such as the cradle (*jhula* or *palna*) of ʿAli Asghar (Imam Husain's infant son, who was martyred when an arrow pierced his thirsty throat as he was cradled in his father's arms), coffins (*tabut*), and the parading of white stallions representing Zuljanah are tantamount to idol worship. The Pakistani Shiʿi reformist scholar Muhammad Husayn Najafi Dhakko (b. 1932) has singled out the "worshippers of the horse [Zuljanah] and *taʿziya*" for the "objectionable," un-Islamic practices that have made their way into South Asian Muharram rituals over the centuries, which were "prone to disgrace Shiʿi Islam in the eyes of others" (Fuchs 2019, 71, 64).

For many South Asian Shiʿa, however, such accusations fail to make sense because their veneration of these objects is mediated by a theology of love (*mahabbah*) and respect for the Imams and the Ahl-e Bait. As we saw earlier in this chapter, the practice of *taʿziyadari*, the construction, display, and procession of likenesses of Imam Husain's shrine-tomb, is based on a theology of love for the Imam and Ahl-e Bait that is rooted in the cultural memory of the Karbala events. Saʿid ʿAbid ʿAli's 1908 treatise *Fazilat-namah-ye taʿziya* (Treatise on the excellences of the *taʿziya*) reveals their thing power as embodied (*mujassam*) objects: "The sayings of many eminent scholars of religion also prove that the Prophet and Husain are present within the *taʿziyas* … those who follow or consult

those people who have observed such hidden events find no reason to doubt [the virtues of] *taʿziyadari*" (ʿAli 1908, 29–30; quoted in Jones 2012, 108). The logic presented in the *Fazilat-namah* is thus: If the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Husain are present in the *taʿziya*, then they likewise render it embodied. As an image-object embodied by the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Husain, the *taʿziya* is worthy of respect, honor, and love just as though you are praying before their physical shrine-tomb.

In one of the many long and complex conversations that I had with Dr. M.M. Taqui Khan, a scientist and revered *zakir* (*majlis* orator) from Hyderabad's Old City, the finer points of the central place of material objects in Shiʿi devotion and their positive legal status (*sharʿi*) was explained through the elaboration of a number of analogies and examples. As we sat in his living room under rapidly circulating ceiling fans on a hot May morning in 2005, Dr. Khan shifted a conversation that we were having about the sacrifices made by the Ahl-e Bait at Karbala to emphasize the necessity of situating these traditions within the framework of Islamic law (*shariʿah*). He said that one must objectively determine whether a practice is against *shariʿah* or not. According to Dr. Khan, traditions of devotion associated with the Imams and Ahl-e Bait practiced by South Asian Shiʿa were not contradictory to Islamic legal proscriptions (of which the Qurʾan is a foundational source of law) against *shirk* or other non-permissible (*na-jaʾiz*) actions.

Shiʿa like Dr. Khan, a highly educated scientist and *zakir* (orator) whose discourses in the *majlis* often brought together matters of faith, law, literature, science, and current events, describes going before the *ʿalam* as a worshipful act of giving honor or reverence to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. The respect, love and honor that Shiʿi devotees feel for the Imams and Ahl-e Bait are based on relationships of asymmetry, similar to that of a parent and child, or a spiritual master and disciple. For example, a child will rise from a sitting position when a parent enters the room. This is done as an act of reverence for the parent, not worship. Reverence for a person because of the emotional or sentimental attachments that they feel is fundamentally different from the act of worship.

What this example demonstrates is the tendency to confuse, whether intentional or not, worship and reverence and its related practices (veneration, love, and respect), and is reflected in the theology of the reformist theologian Sayyid ʿAli Naqi Naqvi.

> Thus, in the physical absence of the Holy Prophet and of his kith and kin, too, who were his living embodiments, we stand separated from these living symbols of Divinity by the gulf of time and space. Yet, when the opportunity offers, we now rush to Medina to pay homage at his shrine. We kiss the foot of the Holy Prophet's sacred grave in deep reverence of him. By doing so, it is not the heap of earth over his body that we pay our homage to. We do that because that piece of ground is his last resting place. Likewise, Karbala is another place where one can go and kiss the feet of Holy Prophet's grandson, Imam Husain's grave. To say that his sacred grave is a lifeless object makes no sense. That letter, analogy of which we have read above was also lifeless. It was the writer of the letter who was the object of affection. Similarly, it is not the heap of earth on the lifeless wooden coffin that we revere.
>
> Source: Sayyid ʿAli Naqi Naqvi, *ʿAzadari: A Historical Review of the Institution of ʿAzadari for Imam Husain* (Karachi: Peermahommed Ebrahim Trust, 1974), 132.

In a series of lectures delivered on the history of *ʿazadari* (mourning ritual) in the early 1970s, the Lucknow-based Shiʿi religious scholar Sayyid ʿAli Naqi Naqvi, popularly known as "Naqqan Sahib" (d. 1988), justified the necessity of constructing *taʿziya* and venerating *ʿalams* as "manipulated resemblances" that aid South Asian Shiʿa with establishing a connection to Karbala, distant both geographically and in terms of historical time (Naqvi 1974, 133). Shiʿa keep *taʿziya* and hang posters of the Kaʿba in Mecca or the Prophet's mosque in Medina as outward symbols of their love and reverence for the figures and places sacred specifically to the Shiʿa and to the global Muslim community. The author of the article from *al-Muntazar* journal that I discuss in the book's introduction,

arguing for the permissibility of *taʿziya*, likewise makes a case for using "manipulated resemblances" as a substitute when pilgrimage is impossible. Quoting from Majlisi's seventeenth-century *Zad al-maʿad* (Provisions for the heavenly journey), the author of the *al-Muntazar* article proposes, "Allamah Majlisi (r.a.) has narrated from Sheikh Mufid (r.a.) and Sayed ibn Taoos (r.a.) in the ʿAamaal of 17th Rabiul Awwal' that: 'If you wish to do *Ziyarat* of the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.a.) at a place other than Medina then after doing Ghusl 'make the figurine effigy' of his grave in front of you and write his name on it. And turn your heart towards him and recite…'" (al-Muntazar 1994).

In Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Arabian Peninsula, Shiʿi pilgrimage constellates around the shrine-tomb complexes holding the earthly remains of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, known collectively as the *ʿatabat-e ʿaliyat*. For Shiʿa living in South Asia, which is geographically and culturally distant from the burial places of such exalted figures as the Imam ʿAli (Najaf), Imam Husain, ʿAbbas, and Qasem (Karbala), and Damascus (Sakinah), replicas (*shabih*) and miniaturized representations of the real make what is beyond reach immediate and tangible. A *taʿziya*, although it may be made of paper, bamboo and tinsel, *is*, for a Shiʿa, the tomb and body of Imam Husain. Kissing the *taʿziya* has a translocative effect, carrying the devotee from her or his ritual location in India or Pakistan to the silver, gold, and copper latticework grille (*zarih*) around Imam Husain's tomb. Dr. Khan stressed the importance of intention (*niyyah*) in any act of worship, which is reinforced in numerous arguments made by Shiʿa in India and Pakistan regarding the spiritual comfort that replicas (*shabih*) such as coffins (*tabut*), cradles (*jhula*), and the *ʿalam* have in bringing the Imams and Ahl-e Bait into the present.

These debates, briefly introduced here, regarding the permissibility of erecting, displaying, and taking out in procession objects such as *ʿalams*, *taʿziya*, and likenesses (*shabih*) of Imam Husain's horse Zuljanah reflect the inherent ambiguities of Indo-Shiʿi normativity. We hear multiple voices interpreting texts differently and asserting the authenticity of their otherworldly experiences with

the Prophet Muhammad, the Imams, and Ahl-e Bait as competing claimants of Shiʿi religious authority.

Conclusion

The spaces, material objects, and rituals that comprise everyday Shiʿism draw on South Asian practices of auspicious vision. South Asian Shiʿa access the Imams and Ahl-e Bait through the senses, which are activated through acts of reciprocal gazing, called *nazr, didar, or darśan*. Shiʿi Muharram rituals, such as the performance of bloody self-flagellation or the procession of *taʿziya* and *ʿalams*, are hypervisual to the broader public. This is particularly significant because the community constitutes a minority in Pakistan and a micro-minority in India. Despite this emphasis on the visual and its central place in material practices that venerate and invoke the presence and memory of Karbala, Imam Husain, and the Ahl-e Bait, one rarely encounters posters or portrait images of these figures in South Asia, unlike in Iran where highly stylized portraits of Imam ʿAli are ubiquitous.

Why are there so few images of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait in India, where posters and statues of gods and goddesses abound? In India, Shiʿa express particular sensitivity to displaying posters that pictorially represent the Imams, despite the fact that the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah ʿAli Khameneʾi issued a legal opinion (*fatwa*) declaring such depictions permissible, provided they are shown and created with a proper degree of reverence and respect. Portraits of the Imams have been a cause for tension in India. In 2009, a riot broke out in the North Indian city of Aligarh between Sunnis and Shiʿa, caused by the presence of Imam ʿAli's image on a coffin replica (Abbas 2017, 6). In Pakistan, a different visual regime is in place, and both Sunnis and Shiʿa purchase and display devotional posters. For Sunnis, these posters may be of Sufi shrines, the Kaʿba in Mecca or the Prophet's mosque in Medina, or images of the Prophet's blessed sandal (*nalain mubarak*). For Pakistani Shiʿa, common images include portraits of the Imams, of Zuljanah, or poster replicas of Mahmoud Farshchian's 1976 painting, "The Evening of ʿAshura," in which an injured Zuljanah patiently stands while

Zainab and the women of the Ahl-e Bait mourn Husain's martyrdom; all are popular and available at small stalls outside *imambaras* and *imambargahs.* The 1979 Iranian revolution has certainly influenced the popularity of poster and portrait art amongst Pakistani Shiʿa. Sufism has a long history in the provinces of Sindh and the Panjab in Pakistan, with deep traditions of ʿAlid devotion that have also shaped devotional practices and acts of auspicious vision, whether of the spiritual master (*pir* or *shaikh*) and saints, or of their material effects.

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Theoretical Lessons

- "Thing power" is an important theory of New Materialism, a movement that aims to displace the human-centered subject-object binary. Thing power grants matter (inorganic and organic) agency and power, operating "as quasi agents of forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (Bennett 2010, viii).
- Image acts, as theorized by Liza Bakewell, "refer to all humanmade images, including body gestures" (1998, 28). Image acts allow images to *do* things rather than merely serve as representations that can only exist textually through written description.

Notes

1 See Chapter 1 for further discussion of Bibi Pak Daman, the shrine of Ruqayyah bint ʿAli ibn Abi Talib, who was a daughter of Imam ʿAli with his wife Umm al-Banain. Ruqayyah was the sister of ʿAbbas, who was martyred while filling a waterskin (*mashk*) at the Euphrates River to slake the thirst of his niece Sakinah and the other children of the Ahl-e Bait.

2 A *turbah* is a small disk composed of soil from Karbala upon which one places her or his forehead in prostration (*sajdah*) during prayer.

3 *Makara* means crocodile or sea-serpent in Urdu; however, these figures are referred to by this term rather than *azhdaha*, which refers to a fire-breathing dragon.

4 A wooden frame covered with a mattress and pillows that is placed on the back of a camel for the comfort of its riders.

5 Unani medicine (*tibb*) refers to a Perso-Arabic system of medicine derived from the Greek humoral system that later integrated aspects of the Indian

system of Ayurveda. The theory of Unani *tibb* posits that diseases are caused by an imbalance between an individual's temperament and the external environment. Diagnosis and cure seek to reestablish an equilibrium of the two.

6 Mrs. Meer Hassan ʿAli's spelling of foreign terms and names is eccentric, and I have provided the correct spelling and necessary clarifications in footnotes to assist with reading her fascinating description of the advent of ʿAbbas's ʿ*alam* in Lucknow.

7 The Kaʿba.

8 ʿAbbas ibn ʿAli, the son of the first Imam, ʿAli and half-brother of Husain.

9 Karbala.

10 ʿ*Alam.*

11 *Hajji* is an honorific title bestowed on a person who has performed the *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca.

12 Imams.

13 *Chehlum* is also known as *arbaʿin* in South Asia, which is the fortieth day after Imam Husain's martyrdom on 10 Muharram. Muslims traditionally mourn for 40 days following the death of a family member, which concludes with special prayers on *arbaʿin*. On *arbaʿin*, millions of Shiʿa make the pilgrimage to Karbala to be close to Imam Husain on 20 Safar.

5

Every Place Is Karbala, Every Day Is ʿ*Ashura*: South Asian Muharram Rituals

On 9 Muharram in 2005, I was in the thick of my dissertation research on how Hyderabadi Shiʿa commemorate the battlefield wedding of Imam Hasan's teenage son Qasem to Imam Husain's youthful daughter, Fatimah Kubra. The *mehndi ki majlis* commemorating this battlefield wedding on 7 Muharram, which I discuss in Chapter 1, marks the intensification of ritual activity in the days leading up to ʿ*ashura* (10 Muharram), when Imam Husain was killed. In most parts of South Asia, 8 Muharram is the day when the martyrdom of ʿAbbas, popularly known as "ʿAbbas ʿ*alamdar*" (the standard-carrier) or "Abu Fazl" (the father of Fazl)[1] is remembered and ritual activity further accelerates. The battlefield wedding of Qasem and Fatimah Kubra on 7 Muharram looms large in everyday Shiʿi cultural memory in South Asia, imbued with great social, cultural, and religious significance. This is because marriage is a central rite of passage, and for many, the status of widowhood has been inflected by the Indic taboo of widow remarriage. The seventh is also the day when the commanders of Yazid's army restricted access to the waters of the Euphrates River for Imam Husain's encampment. From the seventh until tenth (ʿ*ashura*) of Muharram, the scorching desert sun burned the lips and parched the throats of the women, men, and especially the children of Imam Husain's small group.

I had spent the past two days attending *majlis* (mourning assemblies) in which events from the battle of Karbala are remembered in spaces that are best understood as a "religious sensorium." As a religious sensorium, the *majlis* is a symbolically rich social space through which Shiʿa engage with material objects, poetry, narrative discourse, and the body to produce sense-experiences that trigger historical memories of Karbala and invoke the presence of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait (the family of the Prophet Muhammad). The mourning assemblies on the eighth of Muharram focus on the martyrdom of Imam Husain's half-brother ʿAbbas. South Asian Shiʿa especially love ʿAbbas for the fierce loyalty he had for his brother and for the profound love that he felt for his little niece Sakinah, which was so deep that he sacrificed his life to ease her thirst. For South Asian Shiʿa, ʿAbbas is a hero with many personae to be venerated, loved, and remembered.

From morning until late into the evening, I joined men, women, and children as they walked through the busy streets of the Darulshifa and Purani Haveli neighborhoods in Hyderabad's Old City, going from one *majlis* to the next. The *majlis* is one of the constituent elements of Muharram ritual that I describe in this chapter. These are collectively known as *ʿazadari* (mourning ritual), and a person who participates in Muharram and other activities associated with remembering the martyrdom of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait that take place throughout the year is known as an *ʿazadar* (mourner).

"Hobson-Jobson": Representing Muharram in the Religious Imaginaire

Going back to the first decades of the 1600s, we find references in the writings of European travelers and residents in India to the public processions of Shiʿa, Hindus, and others, dressed in black, carrying *taʿziya*, beating their breasts, and calling out "Ya Husain!" Reading the accounts of many of these English, French, Italian, and Dutch sojourners in India, the ritual and linguistic practices shaping the commemoration of the events of Karbala during Muharram were largely unintelligible. During the performance of *matam* (self-flagellation), which is performed to the tune of short, rhyming mourning poems known as *nauhah*, devotees cry out, "Ya ʿAli! Ya ʿAli!" "Ya Husain! Ya Husain!" or "Dulha! Dulha!"[2] These observers heard these heart-rending cries to the absent Imams and Ahl-e Bait as variations on the pairing "Hasan, Husain," referring to the Imams Hasan and Husain, who were the sons of Fatimah al-Zahra and the first Imam, ʿAli. The interpretive distance between what was heard by European observers between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries, and how they transcribed these ritualized invocations to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait into English, French, and Italian is vast. "Hasan! Husain!" became "Hosseen Gosseen," "Saucem Saucem," "Jaksom-Baksom," "Hassein and Jassein," and the most evocative rendering of all, "Hobson-Jobson," which became the title of Henry Yule and Arthur Burnell's 1886 Anglo-Indian dictionary. I first learned of *Hobson-Jobson* from Carl Ernst when I was a graduate student at the University

of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who told me that this dictionary got its title from the shouts of “Hasan! Husain!” during Muharram. Rituals commemorating the events of Karbala were such a visible and prominent part of the South Asian ritual landscape that they were frequently described in the letters, journals, and scholarly writings of Europeans, and “Hobson-Jobson” entered into the colonial lexicon as a sort of shorthand to describe Muharram for these outsiders.

We can trace “Hobson-Jobson” to an Englishman from Yorkshire named John Dockery, who used the term in a letter “home” to his brother Roger, which was published in the *Oriental Sporting Magazine* in January 1829. In a letter full of colorful descriptions of attending a “*nach*” (*nautch*, song and dance performed by courtesans) with his master, hunting, multiple illnesses of his own and of others, Dockery’s two references to Muharram in Surat, Gujarat are fleeting, yet informative: “Well, Roger, here we was at Soorat … and it was just the time when the people was busy in junketing and rantipoling about with large paper boxes, all covered with gilding and painted paper like, in memory of two young gentlemen whose names was Hobson and Jobson…” (Dockery 1829, 129). Dockery goes on to recount an extremely confused and incorrect overview of the lineage of Hasan and Husain, which quickly devolved into a racist excursus conflating racial and religious differences between Christians and Muslims. He continued his description of Muharram, writing, “Them paper boxes are purty looking consarns, but then the folks make sich a noise firing and troompeting and shouting Hobson Jobson, Hobson Jobson, that when they brought ‘em before the great gentleman’s ‘ouse where we put oop, he war quite angry, and ordered ‘em to take ‘em away and *throw ‘em into the water!*” (Dockery 1829, 129). Despite Dockery’s rustic language, he is a rather keen observer of Muharram ritual in late-1820s Surat. The paper boxes he describes are *taʿziya*, replicas of Imam Husain’s tomb at Karbala. The enthusiasm and ritual fervor with which the *taʿziya*s were taken out in procession incited anger in Dockery’s host, leading him to order their destruction through immersion in a local body of water. This was extremely surprising, even shocking to Dockery, as indicated by his use of italics. Unbeknownst to Dockery and his host, this is exactly how *taʿziyas* are

"buried" or "cooled" at the end of the ʿ*ashura* procession (*julus*), which I discuss in Chapter 4. We do not know whether Dockery's host was Indian or European, however, it is reasonably safe to assume the latter. Based on the reaction of the host's reaction to the *taʿziya* procession and his order that they be submerged in water immediately, rather than burned or simply dismantled, it is evident that he had lived in India long enough to participate in the ritual grammar of South Asian religious processions.

The Ten Saddest Days: The *Ayyam-e ʿAza*

In what follows, I provide an overview of some of the more important days in the chronology of events that shape the first ten days of Muharram for Twelver Shiʿi communities across South Asia. Certainly, there are communities that may observe the martyrdom of a particular individual on a different day than what I describe here, and some members of the Ahl-e Bait may have more political and cultural resonance in one locale and not so much in another. What I offer is a *snapshot* of the key figures and the major themes associated with them in South Asia; you will get a sense of the rhythm of these ten days of mourning.

In South Asian Shiʿism, ritual remembrance and the historical chain of events do not align. The special days dedicated to individual Imams and members of the Ahl-e Bait with their formalized rituals, narratives, and proliferation of material objects are memory triggers (like Proust's madeleine) through which the past is brought into the present and the continuity of the community is established and assured. According to the historical record, the men who fought alongside Imam Husain died throughout the morning and afternoon of 10 Muharram, known as ʿ*ashura*. All Shiʿa believe, however, that the battle of Karbala epitomizes the spirit of sacrifice, embodied by Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait through what I have elsewhere referred to as a *husaini* ethics[3] of "justice, truth, fraternity, peace and social welfare" (Khayyami 1984, 257). For South Asians, the *husaini* ethics of Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait is set up in binary opposition to the tyranny (*yazidiyyat*) of the ʿUmayyad caliph Yazid, whom the Shiʿa consider an anathema to Islam and the Imamate. The elaborate rituals that invoke cultural

memory of the martyrdom of Imam Husain and his family at the battle of Karbala more than 1300 years after the event are hailed as the triumph of Shiʿism and the preservation of the Prophet Muhammad's vision of Islam over political tyranny.

Over time, as Shiʿism was established in different parts of South Asia, including cities with sizable Shiʿi populations such as Hyderabad, Lucknow, Lahore, Delhi, Bombay (now called Mumbai), and Karachi, as well as in smaller towns and villages comprised primarily of Hindus and Sunni Muslims, Muharram became formalized. Across the subcontinent, a general pattern was established for when important events were commemorated relating to the Imam's departure from Mecca, his interception by Yazid's army, and the subsequent martyrdom of members of the Ahl-e Bait and Husain on *ʿashura*. The first six days of Muharram tend to be relatively "quiet" in comparison with the heightened emotion and ritual activity that characterizes the seventh through *ʿashura*.

Muharram is one of the most visible religious events in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. We can certainly state unequivocally that as a religious event, Muharram is the most visible marker of South Asian Muslim identity. Every year, during the first ten days of Muharram, urban and village landscapes are transformed by men and women dressed in black clothing, taking out processions of *ʿalams* and *taʿziyas*, performing bloody self-flagellation, and filling the streets with the sounds of mourning assemblies intermingled with discourses and poetry describing the suffering of the heroes, all broadcast over loudspeakers.

Mourning for Imam Husain, ʿAbbas, Qasem, Sakinah, and the others reaches its bloody climax on *ʿashura*, yet the days of mourning (*ayyam-e ʿaza*) continue for another two months until 8 Rabiʿ al-Awwal,[4] during which time there are periodic eruptions of ritual action, although it is on a considerably smaller scale. The activities commemorating the battle of Karbala, culminating with *ʿashura*, are referred to by South Asian Shiʿa by the shorthand term "Muharram," which refers both to the month and the repertoire of rituals it invokes.

1 Muharram

Muharram begins when the new moon (*hilal-e* Muharram or *chand rat*)[5] is sighted. Two events are commemorated on the first; the martyrdom of Muslim ibn ʿAqil, Imam Husain's cousin, who had been sent to Kufa to determine their loyalty to the Imam and authenticity of the city residents' offer of safe refuge to Husain, his family, and supporters. Muslim ibn ʿAqil was appointed Husain's representative after the Imam received hundreds of letters from the residents of the Iraqi city of Kufa, a stronghold for the *shiʿat ʿali* (partisans of ʿAli), asking him to overthrow the ʿUmayyad caliph Yazid, who had assumed power in Damascus after the death of his father Muʿawiyyah on 26 April 680 (22 Rajab 60 AH). The Kufans even sent their own representative to the Imam in order to persuade him to join the *shiʿat ʿali* in their city, which encouraged Husain to send his cousin Muslim to assess the situation. In Kufa, Muslim met with both religious and political supporters of Husain, people who believed in the legitimacy of his status as Imam, and others who feared the domination of the ʿUmayyad caliph in Damascus.

The positive response Muslim received from the Kufans encouraged him to write to Imam Husain affirming their loyalty to their cause, which was to have deadly consequences that would irrevocably change Islamic history. Husain set in motion plans to go to Kufa, although he received warnings from other loyal Shiʿa, including ʿAbdullah ibn ʿUmar and ʿAbdullah ibn ʿAbbas, who reminded the Imam of the Kufans' fickle loyalty. He also received a warning from ʿAbdullah ibn al-Zubair, who initially cautioned him, and then later encouraged him to carry on with his plans, because he had his own designs on seizing power. Despite these warnings, Imam Husain continued to organize the move of his followers to Kufa.

With agents spread throughout the empire, Yazid soon learned of Husain's plan to seek the protection and strength in numbers from the *shiʿat ʿali* in Kufa. Yazid appointed a new governor of Kufa named ʿUbaidallah ibn Ziad, who developed an immediate hatred of the *shiʿat ʿali* upon arrival in the city. When Ibn Ziad rode into the city on horseback in disguise, wearing the black turban signifying

the status of a *sayyid* (blood descendant of the Prophet Muhammad), the *shiʿat ʿali* mistook him for Imam Husain, declaring, “We have been waiting for you!” This enraged the new governor, who declared punishment for these partisans of ʿAli. The Kufans were not exactly known for their staunchness, and when faced with punishment, their loyalty to Imam Husain vanished.

Muslim ibn ʿAqil tried to rally the Kufan Shiʿa, which failed miserably; he was captured and beheaded on 8 Dhuʾl Hijjah 60 AH, which was the same day that Imam Husain and his small group of supporters departed from Mecca, traveling in the direction of Iraq. Ibn Ziad let loose a reign of terror over the Kufans, preventing anyone from leaving the city to warn Husain of what had happened to Muslim, and he sealed off the roads connecting the Hijaz (the region where the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located) and Kufa. Messengers that Imam Husain had sent ahead to notify the Kufans of his impending arrival were killed by Ibn Ziad. When Imam Husain learned of this treachery, he foretold of the violence to unfold in the coming days. Writing his monumental history of Islam, *Tarikh al-rasul wa’l-muluk* (The history of the messengers and kings) in the early tenth century, the Sunni Persian historian Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari recounted the events of Karbala in detail. Imam Husain invoked the Qurʾan and spoke of sacrifice and its rewards:

> “Some [of the faithful] have reached their death and some are waiting and have not changed” [Q 33:23]. O God! Make paradise an abode for us [who are waiting] and for those who have reached their death. Gather us and them in a dwelling place of Your mercy and of the desirable reward that You have in store.
>
> (al-Tabari 1991, 99)

The second event that is observed on 1 Muharram is Imam Husain’s refusal to accede power to Yazid. Husain and his supporters were pressured by Yazid and his forces to give his hand in allegiance (*bayʿah*) to the ʿUmayyad caliph, which he refused to do on the grounds that his grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad, had designated the descendants of his daughter Fatimah al-Zahra and her husband

ʿAli to be the religious and political leaders of the Muslim community. Husain's refusal to give his hand in loyalty to Yazid is an enduring symbol for South Asian Shiʿa, who have historically been a micro-community in the subcontinent's Muslim minority population.

3 Muharram

On 3 Muharram, Imam Husain and his entourage were intercepted by Yazid's army at a small place in the Iraqi desert called Karbala. After some altercations with a general named Hurr ibn Yazid, who is celebrated as a hero by South Asian Shiʿa on the fourth of Muharram, the small entourage was ultimately forced to set up camp some distance away from the Euphrates River. During the Year 61 AH (680 CE), the lunar month of Muharram fell during the month of October, when the weather remains blisteringly hot during the day. The heat of the Karbala desert is a favorite theme in South Asian mourning poetry, particularly the short, rhythmic *nauhah*, as well as during the *masaʾib*, the dramatic peak of the *majlis* orator's discourse in which a particular vignette from the sufferings of the Karbala heroes is told, causing devotees to weep and perhaps slap one's thighs or head in grief.

4 Muharram

On 4 Muharram, South Asian Shiʿa commemorate the martyrdom of Hurr ibn Yazid al-Tamimi. Hurr was a general in Yazid's army who was dispatched from Kufa to intercept Imam Husain and bring him as a prisoner to Kufa. Commanding a cavalry of 1000 troops, Hurr prevented Imam Husain from traveling onward to Kufa or returning to Medina. After the noon and midday prayers were recited, Imam Husain called out to Hurr, praising God, and said:

> People, if you fear God and recognise the rights of those who have rights, God will be more satisfied with you. We are the House of Muhammad and as such are more entitled to the authority (*wilaya*) of this affair (i.e. the rule of the community) over you than these pretenders who claim what does not belong to them. They have brought tyranny and aggression among you. If you refuse (us) because you dislike (us) or do not know our rights, and your view has now changed from what came to us in your letters and what your messengers brought, then I will leave you.
>
> (Mufid 1990, 336)

It is clear that Yazid's general Hurr does not understand the full meaning of the Imam's speech. *To which letters does Husain refer?* Hurr eventually leads Imam Husain's caravan to Karbala, where the two sides remained deadlocked until the morning of 10 Muharram, *ʿashura*, when the final battle commenced. Before this happens, Hurr realizes his treachery and defects to Husain's side, seeking the Imam's forgiveness.

Hurr's defection is a much-loved theme among South Asian Shiʿa, and is a popular topic for *majlis* mourning assembly discourses and poems, such as the *marsiyah* and *nauhah*. Hurr's desire to turn to the path of God (*sabil Allah*) is vividly expressed in his declaration: "By God, I am giving my soul the choice between Heaven and the fire (of Hell). By God, I will not choose anything before Heaven, even though I am cut to pieces" (Mufid 1990, 353). This decision between Heaven and Hell is captured in Mir Anis's nineteenth-century Urdu *marsiyah*, in which Hurr joins the army of God and embarks on the path of righteousness ("the straight path," *sirat al-mustaqim*):

Fate brought him from fire to light

Just a moment ago he was an atom

Now he's a resplendent sun!

Pleased, the Intercessor of the Resurrection forgave his mistake

His last moments were spent with his head in the lap of Shabbir [Husain]

He attained stature, honor and splendor in the army of God

When he was reduced to dust, his abode was in the healing dust of Karbala.

(Hyder 2006, 89)

Hurr is a tragic figure – he is a martyr – yet he also embodies the optimistic ethos for justice, for the future, in love for the Imams and the Ahl-e Bait, which underlies South Asian Shiʿism.

7 Muharram

On 7 Muharram, the pace of ritual action accelerates for many South Asian ritual practitioners, whether Shiʿa, Hindu, or Sunni. On this day, ʿUmar ibn Saʿd, a general in Yazid's army, placed 500 troops along the banks of the Euphrates River, effectively eliminating access to its life-giving water for Imam Husain's vastly outnumbered caravan. For the next three days, the children in the group suffered from the stifling heat and thirst, particularly Husain's young daughter, Sakinah, and his infant son, ʿAli Asghar. The image of the thirsty-lipped (*tishnah-lab*) children crying out for ʿAbbas to fetch them water from the Euphrates (Furat) River to slake their relentless thirst is invoked in poetry. ʿ*Ashurkhanah*s dedicated to ʿAbbas often dispense water to devotees through a symbolic waterskin (*mashk-e Sakinah*) as a reminder of his attempts to gather water for the thirsty children.

The seventh is further charged with significance because South Asian Shiʿa observe the battlefield wedding of 11-year-old Fatimah Kubra, Imam Husain's daughter, to her 13-year-old cousin Qasem, son of the second Imam, Hasan (as discussed in Chapter 1). Eager to fight Yazid's army to protect his family and

faith, Qasem beseeched his uncle multiple times to allow him to join the battle, and each time Husain refused his request. Qasem went to his mother complaining of his uncle's refusal to allow him to fight, and she gave her son a letter written by his father Hasan prior to his death in 670. In his testament (*wasiyat-namah*) to his son, Hasan foretold of the calamitous events that would befall his brother on the plain of Karbala. Qasem returned to his uncle with Hasan's letter, where he dramatically emphasized his status as an orphan (*yatim*). Heartbroken, Husain deferred to the wishes of his elder brother, while knowing that his beloved nephew, who he so desired to protect, would soon be martyred. The pathos of this moment is vividly captured in the *Dah majlis* (The ten assemblies), a *marsiyah* written by the statesman-poet Mir ʿAlam Bahadur in eighteenth-century Hyderabad:

"How can I give my approval, alas!

By God, when I remember my brother.

If you populate the battlefield with your corpse,

How will I hold myself accountable to Hasan?"

Hearing the king's words, Qasem was disheartened,

He said, "Uncle, this is my lament,

How will it be possible for me, your majesty,

That I might see your martyrdom with my own eyes?

How can I not lose my neck in this fashion?

Oh King, my fate has been written on my forehead!

This affliction has become such a sign

That my head does not appear to bear any burden at all."

"If you go before me into battle,

How can I show this face of mine to Hasan?"

(Ruffle 2011, 112)

This grievous turn of events propelled Husain to summon his sister Zainab to discuss the situation, and they hastily organized a wedding between Fatimah Kubra and Qasem. Their battlefield wedding was not a joy-filled event, for everyone knew of the suffering and death to come:

The moment at which the bride approached her groom,

Their love was sacrificed.

Everyone began to pray, “Oh God!

Do not bring widowhood on the bride!

May not the home of the bride become ruined!

Nor should the groom sleep in the place of death!”

(Ruffle 2011, 115)

Qasem fought in battle like a fierce warrior, defeating the four sons of the warrior Azraq of Damascus, before killing the fearsome warrior, too. When Qasem was finally killed, his new bride and the other members of the caravan erupted in an outpouring of grief. Fatimah Kubra became a widow before her marriage was even consummated, which figures prominently in South Asian Muharram literature and ritual (condensed from Ruffle 2011, 109–119).

8 Muharram

The increase in the ritual activity of 7 Muharram further accelerates on the following day with the observance of the martyrdom of ʿAbbas ʿ*alamdar*, Husain’s half-brother. Venerated for his courage and martial prowess, ʿAbbas is also revered by South Asian Shiʿa for his fierce devotion to the young children of the caravan. ʿAbbas, lovingly called the *saqqah-e Karbala* (the watercarrier), was martyred at the banks of the Euphrates River as he attempted to fill waterskins to slake the thirst of the suffering children who were crying out to him from the encampment.

The suffering of Imam Husain's daughter Sakinah is often paired with ʿAbbas's family-oriented bravery. Although ʿAbbas is typically portrayed as "Abbas ʿ*alamdar*," the standard-bearer of Karbala, and South Asian Shiʿa do valorize him for his martial prowess and the noble blood coursing through his veins, it is his portrayal in South Asia as a provider and caretaker for his family that incites tears for devotees. Short rhythmic mourning poems (*nauhah*), to which ritual practitioners perform self-flagellation (*matam*), focus on ʿAbbas's role as the protector of the children of the Ahl-e Bait. Sakinah's cries for water is one of the most common themes in 8 Muharram mourning assemblies (*majlis*) and *nauhah* recitation, triggering tears and outpourings of self-flagellation (*matam*) as expressions of grief for the suffering of these beloved heroes:

Distressed, the innocent Sakinah asked the king, "Where is my uncle [*chacha*]?

Dear father, tell me! Whose blood is on this ʿ*alam*? Where is my uncle?

He was not angered by my request for water, so why has he not yet returned?

Now I will never again request water, tell me, papa! Where is my uncle?

(Mansabdar 1987, 53 quoted and translated in Ruffle 2015, 191)

This *nauhah*, written by the Hyderabadi poet "Nagin" Mansabdar, sets up a dialogue between Sakinah and her father Imam Husain. ʿAbbas is physically absent from the scene, yet he is made present through Sakinah's anguished interrogation of her father. Just a small girl, she knows that her uncle has met a grievous fate. Sakinah intuits her uncle ʿAbbas's death because she has seen his bloodied battle standard (ʿ*alam*), which he would never abandon. Amplifying the emotional effect of this *nauhah*, Sakinah displays the psychology of a child who expresses self-blame for negative events that happen: "He was not angered by my request for water, so why has he not yet returned? / Now I will never again request water…"

In another *nauhah* written by the Hyderabadi poet "Shaukat" Bilgrami, Sakinah recites her own lament for her murdered uncle. The refrain is, "My water-carrier

(*saqqah*) was killed at the river," which is repeated to inflame feelings of grief for Sakinah and ʿAbbas:

> This is the lament of the little girl Sakinah, "My water-carrier (*saqqah*) was killed at the river.
>
> Alas, how could such cruel oppression be exacted on me? My water-carrier was killed at the river.
>
> He was unable to bring the water-skin to the encampment, he was unable to give me water.
>
> Now, who will console me? My water-carrier was killed at the river."
>
> (Bilgrami n.d., 97 quoted and translated in Ruffle 2015, 191)

The tragic aspects of *nauhah*s such as these recited on 8 Muharram are amplified by devotees' knowledge that ʿAbbas died on the banks of the Euphrates and Sakinah's thirst will go unquenched (Ruffle 2015, 190–191).

Commemoration of ʿAbbas's martyrdom is a day of intensified grief amongst Lucknow Shiʿa on 8 Muharram. Mourning assemblies focus on his fatal efforts to collect water for the children of the Ahl-e Bait. The narratives and poetry of the *majlis* mourning assembly, as well as devotional objects such as the ʿ*alam* with its *mashk-e Sakinah* establish a South Asian Shiʿi cultural memory of ʿAbbas's loyalty and devotion to family that produces tears and *matam*. ʿAbbas's tenacious loyalty to Husain is also remembered this day through the material form of Husain's standard, a copy of which is kept in many Shiʿi homes in Lucknow.

One of the largest ʿ*alam* processions is taken out in remembrance of ʿAbbas in Lucknow beginning around 11 p.m. on 8 Muharram. The ʿ*Alam Fath-e Furat* (ʿ*alam* of the conqueror of the Euphrates River) is conducted by torchlight as thousands of devotees beat their chests and march from the Daryawali (riverbank) mosque, located near the King George's Medical University, to the Gufran Maʾb Imambara located approximately two kilometers away. The departure point is symbolically significant, representing ʿAbbas's attempt to fill waterskins for the thirsty children. According to Keith Hjortshoj, the triumph of

ʿAbbas was “the victory of love and compassion over evil and injustice, and this priority and sacrifice distinguishes Abbas as a martyr” (Hjortshoj 1977, 1963). A silver, elaborately decorated *mashk* is suspended from the main *ʿalam*, which is erected on a long pole, known as a *naʾizah*. During the procession the *ʿalam* is frequently lowered so that devotees may touch the *mashk* and the *panjah* (outstretched palm representing the “Five Pure Ones,” The Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah al-Zahra, ʿAli, Hasan, and Husain), and obtain the blessing, *barakat*, that emanates. Men stand in ranks and perform *hath ka matam* (striking the chest with opened palms) as the *ʿalam* slowly makes its way from the river to the Gufran Maʾb Imambara. On this day, it is absolutely imperative that no *ʿalam* touch the ground, lest one incur the wrath of ʿAbbas, who despite having both hands cut off by Yazid’s soldiers, gripped the standard and *mashk* in his mouth.

9 Muharram

By 9 Muharram, the energy of the ritual action accelerates as tragedies multiplied for Imam Husain and his family. After sundown on the ninth leading into the dawn of the tenth of Muharram is known as “*shab-e ʿashura*.” The ninth and tenth days of Muharram are an especially intense period of prayer and mourning. From dawn through the long night, devotees of the Ahl-e Bait attend mourning assemblies to weep and pray for Imam Husain and his family who suffered so greatly on the Karbala battlefield.

On 9 Muharram, the ʿUmayyad general ʿUmar ibn Saʿd prepared to attack Imam Husain’s encampment. ʿUmar ibn Saʿd and his forces spent the night in revelry, drinking and celebrating, knowing that their massive army would defeat Husain’s small armed group the next day. Imam Husain and his supporters spent that final night together in prayer. Knowing the fate that was to befall him the next day, Imam Husain bid farewell to his family. With death a certainty, he gave his followers one final opportunity to depart for safety; all remained loyally by his side.

The theme of prayer and mourning is a constant normativizing subtext for orienting Shiʿi moral self-cultivation. According to a *hadith* of the eighth Imam,

ʿAli Reza, those who avoid the affairs of the world on the ninth and the tenth of Muharram and who are devoted to prayer and mourning for the suffering of the Ahl-e Bait will be rewarded. Imam Reza cautions those who believe these to be joyous days or a time when one should be focused on worldly matters that they will not receive the reward of heaven on the Day of Judgment. God will consider such misguided people to be like the ʿUmayyad agents Ibn Ziad and ʿUmar ibn Saʿd, and they will be consigned to hell (Schubel 1993, 86). In the section on how to properly conduct prayer during *shab-e ʿashura* in the Shiʿi book of jurisprudence *Tuhfat al-ʿawwam* (The gift for the public), written by the twentieth-century Pakistani scholar Maulana Sayyid Manzur Husain Naqvi to provide guidance to religious scholars, we find another *hadith* on the authority of Imam Reza, in which he said,

> When my great-grandfather (*jadd-e amjad*) *hazrat* Imam Husain (A.S.) was martyred, blood and red dust poured down from the sky. If you cry and mourn to such an extent for this oppressed one that tears flow down your face, then God (*khudavand-e ʿalam*) will forgive you of your sins, small and great. He then said that if you desire that at the time of your death that no sins linger, then do a prayer (*ziyarat*) for Imam Husain and curse his murderers. When you remember Imam Husain's sufferings then say, "I wish that I, too, could have been with the martyrs of Karbala! Then I would attain a rank of great dignity."
>
> (Naqvi n.d., 455–456)

The moral imperative of this *hadith* is clear: prayer and mourning for Husain's martyrdom must be filled with pure and focused intention (*niyyah*), and while one should always be mindful of Husain's suffering, there are times when it requires one's full emotional and spiritual attention.

The imperative to pray through the night of 9 Muharram is further reinforced by a *hadith* from the sixth Imam, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, that one should pray as though he is with Imam Husain. The larger body of the ritual of prayer performed on *shab-e ʿashura* is known as *ʿamal*, which is a petitionary prayer in which one seeks the

intercession of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait (discussed in Chapter 6). If one performs the *ʿamal-e shab-e ʿashura* for the entire night with proper intention and purity of emotion, an act of transposition is effected in which it is as though the devotee were at Karbala *with* Imam Husain. The emphasis on the nighttime prayer vigil is to share in the experience of Husain's deep piety and faith in God while knowing his enemies were preparing for battle and that he would become a martyr the next day.

The *ʿamal* performed on the night of *ʿashura* requires the devotee to recite different types of prayers including *ziyarats* to Imam Husain, short *surahs* (chapters) of the Qurʾan, and a call for blessings (*salawat*, also known as *durud*) for the Ahl-e Bait and the Karbala martyrs. Over the course of the night after the *ziyarat* of Imam Husain is recited, four cycles (*rakʿat*) of prayers are to be completed. There are two options for the recitation of prayers. A devotee may choose to recite the opening chapter (*Surat al-Fatihah*) once and 50 times surah 112, the chapter of purity (*Surat al-Ikhlas*, also known as the chapter of oneness, *al-Tawhid*), about God's uniqueness. The second option is as follows: *Rakʿat* one: Recite once the *Fatihah*, then ten recitations of the *ayat al-kursi* (the "throne verse," 2:255), attesting to God's uniqueness and omnipotence. *Rakʿat* two: Recite once the *Fatihah*, then ten recitations of *Surat al-Ikhlas* (112). *Rakʿat* three: Recite once the *Fatihah*, then ten recitations of chapter 113, *Surat al-Falaq* (the dawn), calling on believers to seek refuge with God. *Rakʿat* four: recite once, *al-Fatihah*, then ten recitations of the final chapter of the Qurʾan, *Surat al-Nas* (114, mankind), affirming God is the ruler of humanity and protector from evil. Upon completion of the rounds of prayer, one next recites the *Surat al-Ikhlas* 100 times, followed by a call for blessings (*salawat*) on the family of the Prophet, "O God, bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad," and "O God, I curse the murderers of Husain and his companions!" These prayers require absolute absorption and bring the devotee into Husain's night of prayer as the final battle at Karbala approached. Encountering suffering and death, these prayers enjoin the faithful that God is merciful and Imam Husain's martyrdom was for the preservation of the religion and community.

10 Muharram

On the afternoon of 10 Muharram, Imam Husain was martyred by a hail of arrows that pierced his body. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, historical event does not align with ritual practice, and this is especially true on ʿ*ashura*, when the fighting took place and ʿAbbas, ʿAli Akbar, Qasem, Hurr, and other heroic figures were martyred. In South Asia, ʿ*ashura* is reserved for remembering Imam Husain's martyrdom, which takes place in a variety of ways from early morning through the night, called the *sham-e ghariban*, the "night of the exiles." For many Shiʿa, the intense period of mourning is completed, although for those who are especially devoted, particularly women and the elderly, the days of mourning (*ayyam-e ʿaza*) will continue for nearly two more months until 8 Rabiʿ al-Awwal.

ʿ*Ashura*: The Battle of Good vs. Evil, Or Remembering Imam Husain's Martyrdom

Before sunrise on the morning of ʿ*ashura*, Imam Husain's eighteen-year-old son ʿAli Akbar gave the *fajr azan*, the dawn call to prayer. Imam Husain then went before his enemies and reproached them for turning away from Islam in the most reprehensible fashion: By launching this attack against his grandson and his family. General Hurr (see 4 Muharram in this chapter) was deeply moved by Husain's speech and joined his small force. In retaliation, Hurr was killed by Yazid's army very early in battle. Various men in Imam Husain's entourage made sorties and fought against Yazid's vastly larger army and were killed. Notable among those were Husain's nephew Qasem, the bridegroom of Karbala, who, although barely a teenager, valiantly fought and killed the four sons of the infamous warrior Azraq Damashqi before then killing him. Qasem fought extraordinarily until he was martyred with a spear thrust into his chest, followed by almost thirty additional blows driven into his youthful body.

Next, ʿAbbas Abu Fazl, Husain's half-brother, was martyred at the banks of the Euphrates River (see 8 Muharram in this chapter). One of the last of the adult

males in the Ahl-e Bait to die before the ultimate battle was Husain's eldest son ʿAli Akbar, whose memory is held especially dear for many. ʿAli Akbar is widely considered to be the likeness of the Prophet Muhammad, "*shabih-ye Paighambar*," and thus some Shiʿa, like the great *majlis* orator Rashid Turabi (d. 1973), considered him to be the "continuation of the family tradition of safeguarding the truth" (Hyder 2006, 90).

After the martyrdom of these close relatives, Imam Husain ventured forth in battle, where it is said he killed hundreds or even thousands of Yazid's forces. In one moment when he returned to the encampment, he saw the women gathered around his six-month-old son, ʿAli Asghar, who was nearly dead from thirst after three days without water. The women begged Husain for help, and he gathered his son in his arms and approached the enemy army seeking mercy; he beseeched them to give water to his baby and the other children in the group. ʿUmar ibn Saʿd issued orders for ʿAli Asghar's death with an arrow to his small throat. ʿAli Asghar is represented by an empty cradle (*jhula* or *palna*), which is often part of the repertoire of objects displayed in Shiʿi religious buildings and Muharram processions (see Figure 5.01a and 5.01b, particularly those dedicated to ʿAbbas (the protector of children), Imam Zain al-ʿAbidin, and Imam Husain.

Fighting began in earnest after ʿAli Asghar's martyrdom. Husain charged the enemy and killed hundreds more. He was reminded of his mission, which was to save his religion from the political tyranny of the ʿUmayyad caliphs. In Shiʿi cultural memory, the integrity of the Prophet Muhammad's message and the spiritual-political power of the Imamate must be preserved through Imam Husain's martyrdom. In late afternoon, Imam Husain completed a final prayer before he was decapitated, and his body riddled with arrows. Imam Husain's horse, Zuljanah, dipped its face in Imam Husain's blood and went toward the women's encampment, crying and whinnying (discussed in Chapter 2). Zuljanah had arrows in his neck, and his reins were cut, and there were wounds on his feet. Hearing the commotion Zuljanah was making, the women of the Ahl-e Bait came out from the tents and, seeing Husain's riderless horse, cast off their veils in mourning and began weeping and striking their heads in grief. The women

clasped their arms around the grieving Zuljanah and wept. Throughout the “night of exiles” (*sham-e ghariban*), which lasted through the night of the tenth of Muharram until dawn of the eleventh, Zuljanah repeatedly reared up on his hooves to protect the women of the Ahl-e Bait from the marauding soldiers of Yazid’s army, who had set fire to the encampment. The next morning, the women were taken captive, bound for Kufa and then to Yazid’s court (*darbar*) in Damascus. Overcome with grief, Zuljanah walked into the Euphrates River and was never seen again. Shiʿi devotees of Zuljanah believe that the horse did not die; he is in Occultation with the twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, who has been in an occulted state (*al-ghaybah al-kubra*) since 941, where he is absent yet present and will return to re-establish a period of justice on earth.

(a)



(b)



Figure 5.01a and 5.01b Cradles (*jhula*) of ʿAli Asghar in Karachi.

Photos by Mohammad Nabeel Jafri, 2019.

In the cultural memory of Imam Husain's martyrdom, two themes entwine for South Asian Shiʿa: justice and love. Faith in Islam calls for justice to be exacted for the iniquities wrought on the family of the Prophet Muhammad and his prophetic message. In a *marsiyah* by the nineteenth-century poet from the North

Indian city of Lucknow, Mir Anis (d. 1873), a clear distinction is made indicating that Imam Husain and his supporters preferred prayer to fighting and defensively performed the latter only to protect themselves, their family, and religion:

That leader true of both the worlds stood at the place of prayers.

The other side beat battle drums, this side called for prayers.

Such true, devoted men whose speech was steeped in scriptural texts.

Such fighters for cause of truth, the very soul of faith.

So thoroughly devout, they were distinguished among saints.

O God, what wonderful comrades they were, what warriors bold.

What superb horsemen, they themselves! what matchless steeds they rode!

All praise and honor they deserved, by virtue of great deeds.

So far outnumbered, yet so steadfast in self-sacrifice.

They suffered from such searing thirst, the soul strained hard to leave.

And yet they patiently bore hardships with parched throats, dried lips.

(Mir Anis quoted in Zaidi 1986, 75)

Anis's poem is densely layered with imagery casting Imam Husain and his supporters as men of faith first, and secondarily as "fighters for [the] cause of truth." As fighters for the cause of truth, Mir Anis portrays the men fighting alongside Imam Husain as people committed to justice (ʿ*adalah*), which is an especially important doctrine in Shiʿism. The Shiʿi conception of justice (ʿ*adalah*) is the belief that God is Just, always acts fairly, and does not commit unjust acts against humanity. Therefore, the outsized army that fought against Imam Husain's small troop of 72 men was a sign of God's divine justice. Such a horrific act of religious and political violence committed against the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and his family sent a shocking message to the early Muslim community, warning them of the dangers of abandoning the religion. These men are placed in stark contrast to the soldiers of Yazid's army, who beat

battle drums instead of heeding the call to prayer. Vastly outnumbered by the ʿUmayyad army, Imam Husain's men prayed through the night and even the next day during the battle, while their horses were steadfast and faithful, as exemplified by Husain's loyal steed Zuljanah.

Love is a multi-faceted theme that strongly resonates with Shiʿa on ʿ*ashura*, both in the rituals performed[6] and through poetry recited that commemorates Imam Husain's martyrdom. In another *marsiyah* by Mir Anis, love is expressed through the willingness, eagerness even, of Imam Husain's male relatives to attain martyrdom and join God's heavenly court (*darbar*):

On the right side of the camp were the relatives of the Imam,

their glowing faces brightened the dark desert of Karbala.

…

Like beads in a rosary, they were all united.

…

They anxiously waited for their death.

…

They would desire neither food nor water,

their aim was to offer their heads to Allah.

The young boys pleaded to be the first martyrs,

and the older ones left this decision up to the Imam.

In the middle of this assembly was the King of the world,

like the sun amidst the stars.

(Mir Anis quoted in Hyder 1995, 9–10)

Reading the lines from this *marsiyah*, you might wonder how I consider this poem to reflect love imagery. As with the previous *marsiyah*, Husain's family members feel such overwhelming love for the Imam and for God that they

compete with one another regarding who will go first to the battlefield, be martyred, and enter God's lofty court (*darbar*), where they will be reunited with Husain. Impending slaughter by a massively outsized army may seem to be a terrifying prospect for young boys, yet Husain's sons and nephews yearn to be protectors of their family and religion. The long hours of the night of *shab-e ʿashura*, made even darker by the impending martyrdom of Imam Husain, is brightened by the "glowing faces" of the young boys and men of the Ahl-e Bait, who anxiously await their death as a sacrifice of love.

Another *marsiyah* poet writing in nineteenth-century Lucknow, Mirza Dabir (d. 1875), fuses Sufi and Shiʿi love imagery in describing Imam Husain as the consummate lover (*ʿashiq*) striving along the mystical path to attain union with God. Imam Husain's suffering is transformed from a hardship on his physical body to a mystical experience of sublime suffering as a means of annihilating the self through God (*fanaʾ fiʾllah*).

For the sake of thirst, he [Hussain] fasted in youth,

For the sake of thirst, he turned away from Zehra's [Fatimah's] milk,

For the sake of thirst, he never accepted the Euphrates favor,

For the sake of thirst, he abnegated water from the seventh of Muharram.

The world remembers the story of his slaying,

and his utterance of 'thirst, thirst' while biting the tongue.

(Mirza Dabir quoted in Hyder 1995, 6)

In Dabir's poem, Imam Husain is the ultimate Sufi, accepting physical suffering in order to achieve the greater good. Under his breath he may utter, "I thirst, I thirst," (*al-ʿatash*, *al-ʿatash* in Arabic), yet this is his own individual, bodily suffering, which is inconsequential compared to the larger mission with which he has been tasked. Yet, the world has witnessed and understood the monumentality of Imam Husain's actions, which the Shiʿa remember and feel tremendous love and sadness for the suffering that was endured:

Then, the cry of “thirst!”

Like the thunder-peal of the battle-cry (rajaz)

Then the caravan of the People of the Heart (Ahl-e Dil),

moves along the sands of the desert.

Furat [the Euphrates] is tempered by fire.

The Ravi and Ganga are coagulated with blood.

(Jaʿfri 2015, 532)

ʿAli Sardar Jaʿfri’s (d. 2000)[7] *marsiyah*, “Karbala” begins with this powerful stanza that echoes and takes up the deep love South Asian Shiʿa feel for Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Dil (“the People of the Heart”), who suffered for the preservation of religion. Two lines from this stanza direct the listener or reader to Imam Husain’s impact in South Asia. The message of Karbala spread along the sands of the desert far and wide to places such as South Asia, where the heroic qualities of Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait and the compelling, family-focused narratives of their sufferings fit into existing subcontinental religious themes and motifs. The final line mentions the Ravi[8] and Ganges Rivers, both of which are in North India and play important roles in the spiritual lives of diverse religious communities. In South Asia, devotion to Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait is not limited to the Shiʿa, for Hindus and Sunnis also participate in different ways in Muharram (see Chapter 1).

In this section I have provided an overview of the more significant days in the Muharram calendar leading up to *ʿashura* in South Asia. Although most of Karbala’s heroes were martyred on *ʿashura*, particular days have been reserved for commemorating figures such as ʿAbbas, Qasem and Fatimah Kubra, ʿAli Akbar, and ʿAli Asghar, for whom special mourning assemblies are held in which *marsiyahs* are recited, short *nauhah* poems are chanted, and self-flagellation is performed. *ʿAlams*, *taʿziyas*, and other objects including cradles for ʿAli Asghar are displayed and taken out in short processions. From dawn until late in the night, there are mourning assemblies to attend, poetry to hear, and offerings and

prayers to ʿ*alams* and *taʿziyas* to be made. Karbala is in South Asia in every town, village and city.

Always Weep and Remember in the *Majlis-e ʿAza*

A command by God, Imam Husain's martyrdom was an act of beauty to be commemorated through tears of sorrow and love. Husain's sacrifice was for the preservation of Islam, foretold throughout prophetic history, and even foreshadowed by the Prophet Muhammad to his daughter Fatimah, the mother of the martyr-Imam: "Till the Day of Judgment there will always be groups of men and women among my followers who will weep for him and hold meetings to commemorate his slaughter" (Hyder 2006, 20).

Since at least the tenth century in Buyid Baghdad, men and women have met and performed mourning rituals to commemorate Imam Husain's martyrdom. By the sixteenth century in the Deccan region in South India, Muharram came under state patronage both by the Qutb Shahi sultans, who established Shiʿism as the religion of state, as well as in Bijapur where a number of the ʿAdil Shahi sultans also professed a Shiʿi orientation and observed Muharram. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Deccani sultans were patrons of translation projects of a Persian-language hagiography of the twelve Imams, *Rowzat-e shohada* (The garden of the martyrs), written *circa* 1502 by Mullah Husain Vaʿez Kashefi in Herat, Afghanistan. *Rowzat-e shohada* became the pre-eminent source-text for *majlis* orators and poets in South Asia (discussed in Chapter 2). The Persian "original" has been endlessly translated into Indian vernacular languages including Urdu and Hindi with titles such as *Dah majlis* (Ten assemblies) and *Karbal-katha* (Karbala story).

In 2005, when I was doing my fieldwork for my dissertation, I attended many mourning assemblies in Hyderabad. On a number of occasions, I was asked by *zakirahs* and *zakirs* what I thought of their *majlis* discourse. This provided me with the opportunity to comment that I was struck by how their *hadith-khwani* and *masaʾib* (elements of the discourse) closely resembled the content and structure of Kashefi's *Rowzat-e shohada*. I excitedly anticipated our entering into

deep, literary and theological discussions about *Rowzat-e shohada*, but the orators typically responded by giving me a blank look and saying something like, “I don’t know what *book* this comes from, but this is the account of the events of Karbala that I know.” This innate *textual* knowledge is another subcontinental theme into which Shiʿism is enfolded. In his far-reaching studies of South Asian *Ramayana* traditions, A.K. Ramanujan has observed, “In India and Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* for the first time. The stories are there, ‘always ready’�� (Ramanujan 1991, 46). Likewise, mothers bring their babies and children to the *majlis*, where they are exposed to the events of the Karbala cycle through poetry and the *zakir’s* discourse. They become “literate” in a vast South Asian textual tradition about Karbala that is accessed through the oral performative genres of narrative discourse and poetic recitation (Ruffle 2010, 185–186). For these orators, the emphasis is on learning and mastering a core set of narratives experientially, memorizing them, and performing them correctly. *Rowzat-e shohada* serves as an invisible scriptorium from which poets and orators draw on events, characters, and themes, which have been translated and transformed to reflect Indo-Shiʿi cultural memory.

The *majlis* takes a variety of forms throughout South Asia, although there is a general progression of events that structures the mourning assembly. Virtually all mourning assemblies are sex-segregated and are designated as being a men’s (*mardane*) or ladies’ (*zanani*) *majlis*. In some cases, the mourning assembly organizers may strictly limit attendance to either men or women. More typical are the mourning assemblies that are held in either public ʿ*ashurkhanahs*, *imambaras*, or people’s homes in which space is allocated for members of the opposite sex to listen to the *majlis* program from a closed room or from behind a screen. In Hyderabad, I attended a great number of men’s mourning assemblies where I was expected to sit in an ersatz ladies’ section. Depending on the circumstances of the family hosting the *majlis*, if it was hosted in someone’s home the *zananah* (women’s quarters) for hearing the *majlis* might be in a well-appointed living room with prime view of the events taking place in the courtyard outside. In other instances, it meant sitting in a back bedroom

completely separated from the ritual action, with the only connection for hearing the *majlis* orator's voice, the poetic *marsiyah*, the grief-inducing *nauhah,* and the concluding *ziyarat* through a staticky loudspeaker transmitting the mourning assembly throughout the neighborhood. I have sat on crisp white sheets and grimy carpets on the floor, comfortable sofas, beds, and staircases, and I have sat in crowded, gender-segregated rooms to hear orations in India and Pakistan. A *majlis* may be as short as thirty minutes or last for more than two hours. The duration is dependent on a number of factors: the figure and date being commemorated, as well as the oratorical skills of the *zakir*. As the days of mourning (*ayyam-e ʿaza*) continue past 10 Muharram, assemblies tend to be shorter in duration, although their length will increase on important dates such as the fortieth day after Imam Husain's martyrdom, *arbaʿin* (also known as *chehlum*), on 20 Safar.

While all *majlis* are held to remember and mourn the martyrdom and suffering of the Imams and the Ahl-e Bait, there is a remarkable variety to the types of mourning assemblies that are held in South Asia. Broadly speaking, there are at least six different types of *majlis* that South Asian Shiʿa host: (1) the annual (*salanah*) *majlis*; (2) a series (*silsilah*) of mourning assemblies; (3) the *majlis* round (*dawrah*); (4) mourning assemblies held in relation to a person's death or a marriage;[9] (5) weekly or daily mourning assemblies, and (6) *majlis* that fit none of the above categories[10] (for further discussion of the different types of *majlis*, see Howarth 2005, 40–43).

The Annual *Majlis*

Individuals or families typically host *salanah* mourning assemblies, which is believed to be an act that accrues spiritual reward (*sawab*). Although annual mourning assemblies certainly do take place in the formal space of *ʿashurkhanahs*, *imambaras* and *imambargahs*, they are most often held in people's homes and are the type of mixed gender gatherings I describe above. It is common for the same *zakir* or *zakirah* to perform year after year at the same *salanah* mourning assembly.

Silsilah Mourning Assemblies

These are a series of mourning assemblies that take place at the same time and place over a number of days. A *zakir* speaks on a set topic or text over these days. The *zakir* and the topic on which he speaks is often advertised on posters that are put up throughout the neighborhood, although particular orators cultivate aficionados who avidly await the revealing of the subject of their discourses each year. As the days of Muharram pass, the focus of the *zakir's* discourse gradually shifts away from the topic of the series to the suffering (*masaʾib*) of the Karbala martyrs.

The *Dawrah* (Round) of Mourning Assemblies

This type of mourning assembly is participated in primarily by boys and men who rise before the dawn (*fajr*) prayer and travel from one house to another for brief, informal mourning assemblies that may last no longer than ten minutes. The emphasis is on the recitation of mourning poetry, hearing a few stanzas of a *marsiyah* and the chanting of a *nauhah* before moving on to the next house. In the *dawrah* style of mourning assemblies, there may be a brief discourse performed by a *zakir*. This type of mourning assembly relies on the men and boys who participate to provide a brief discourse, which usually reflects the interests or concerns of the individual speaking. Because of the brevity and informality of these mourning assemblies, the *dawrah* is neighborhood-centered.

Regular Mourning Assemblies

Throughout the year on Thursdays, Shiʿa gather for mourning assemblies in domestic *ʿashurkhanahs* and *imambaras* throughout South Asia. These mourning assemblies are informal gatherings, usually organized by the women of the household and limited to immediate and extended family. The informal nature of these Thursday domestic mourning assemblies means a family member with good speaking skills and knowledge of the Karbala events will provide a brief discourse. More formal *majlis* are also held on Thursdays, usually in the late

afternoon and evening in an ʿ*ashurkhanah* or *imambara*, which is presided over by a *zakir* and follows the established program of the mourning assembly.

The *Majlis* Structure

The mourning assembly can be divided into roughly two halves, which may not be of equal duration, depending on the individual whose martyrdom is being remembered and when in the cycle of mourning the *majlis* is held. The first part of the mourning assembly takes place with participants seated on the floor; the second segment of the *majlis* involves active mourning for the martyr, and is performed in a standing position.

Opening: The Call for Blessing (*Salawat*)

"Allahuma salli ʿala Muhammad wa Al-e Muhammad!" – O God, bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad this litany-like blessing begins the *majlis*. This call will punctuate the mourning assembly countless more times as the *zakir* calls devotees to bless Muhammad and his family. *Majlis* participants who feel overcome by emotion or who strongly respond to the *zakir's* discourse may shout out one or more times for a *salawat* or *durud*, to which everyone will enthusiastically reply, "Allahuma salli ʿala Muhammad wa Al-e Muhammad!" The *salawat* is based on the qurʾanic command in 33:56, "Allah and His Angels send blessings on the Prophet: O you who believe! you send blessings on him, and salute him with all respect" (cited in Hyder 2006, 23).

Burning Words: *Soz*

Directly after the *salawat*, the caller of the blessing might recite a melodic poem called *soz*, a "burning" poem of mourning. *Soz* is performed with a melodic accompaniment, and its performance is exemplified by the Shiʿi culture of Lucknow. *Soz* corresponds with a style of mourning in which poetry is recited as a means of evoking a mood rather than necessarily narrating an event. *Soz* tend to be shorter selections of *marsiyah* poems, with the focus on the use of meter and

melody to establish a mood. In this regard, *soz* establishes an emotional tone for the *majlis*.

Poetic Meditations and Salutations: The *Salam*

After setting the emotional tone with the *soz*, a *salam*, a brief poem of salutation is recited. The *salam* might be described as somewhat eclectic in its content and focus. Integrating brief descriptions of vignettes from Karbala with domestic themes, the *salam* reflects the individuality of its author. The *salam* places Karbala within the context of contemporary life (Bard 2002, 263).

Poetry of Epic Heroes: The *Marsiyah*

The next phase of the *majlis* continues with more "sophisticated" poetic forms. The *marsiyah* is a lengthy poem focusing on a singular moment in the Karbala cycle. Favorite topics of the *marsiyah* include moments of leavetaking by Imam Husain and other men of the Ahl-e Bait from the women in the encampment, battle scenes, or character descriptions. Such topics and the length of these poems ascribe an epic quality to the *marsiyah*.

Mir Muhammad Nawab Munis (d. 1875) of Lucknow, the younger brother of the master poet Mir Anis, was also an accomplished *marsiyah* writer. Written in 53 stanzas, Mir Munis's "When Husain Carried Akbar's Corpse from the Killing Ground," is of average length, and can be compared with other *marsiyahs* that are over one hundred stanzas (Bard 2002, 160–172). This *marsiyah* narrates the moment just after Imam Husain's 18-year-old son ʿAli Akbar was martyred and the Ahl-e Bait were thrown into mourning for him:

1.

When Husain carried Akbar’s body from the slaying-ground

Husain carried that youth from the front lines of battle

Husain drew out the moon from the evening clouds

Husain lifted up that lion, his last breath on his lips, and brought

him from the wilderness

He cried out “Come take the corpse of your son, Bano!”

“Akbar’s heart has been pierced by the dagger, Bano!”

…

3.

When that lord’s pain-ridden voice reached the tent

The female progeny of the Prophet of both worlds were aghast

Sakinah shrieked, “Alas! Alas! My brother!”

Zainab, striking herself, rushed outside in agitation

Bano rushed out, distraught and bareheaded

…

22.

“I sacrifice myself for you, whom I nurtured for eighteen years!

Summon me to your side somehow

The spears of cruelty and oppression have smitten your chest

Oh boy of luxuriant tresses, your youthful whiskers have sprouted in

blood

Why couldn’t the horrors that befell this moon-like breast have

stricken me?

I’ve no desire to live, my precious, no desire to live!”

23.

“Oh, my lion, you never obtained the pleasures of youth

Oh, you second Joseph, you had no peace in this foreign land

Not a drop of liquid, save the shedding of tears, did you get

You were raised drinking milk to your heart’s content, and then

denied water

You died without even bringing me a bride, my son

All Bano had is ground to dust, my son.”

(Translation by Bard 2002, 178, 181)

The episodic nature of this excerpt from Mir Munis’s *marsiyah* takes the listener deep into the grief felt by Imam Husain and the women of the Ahl-e Bait, particularly his mother, the Iranian princess Shahrbanu (here called by the diminutive Bano), as the life ebbs from ʿAli Akbar’s youthful, attractive, and tragically unmarried body. Much of the conversation is one-sided; Shahrbanu speaks to her son, lamenting how cruel fate is that his life has been cut short just as he was embarking on young manhood (recall Zainab poetically speaking to ʿAun and Muhammad in Chapter 2). Shahrbanu calls ʿAli Akbar “a second Joseph” who in the Qurʾan (surah 12) and in Sufi romance traditions is described as incomparably beautiful. ʿAli Akbar’s mother mourns her son, with his luxuriant tresses and the youthful whiskers growing on his cheeks, martyred while in the bloom of youthful handsomeness. She lashes out at the insidiousness of the ample milk he was able to suckle at her breasts as a baby, yet as a young man, the life-giving waters of the Euphrates River have been denied him. Perhaps most cruel of all is the fact that at the age of 18, ʿAli Akbar reached the age of marriageability and should be bringing forth a new generation of the Ahl-e Bait, a mother’s wish that Yazid’s henchmen have denied to Shahrbanu.

The Remembrance: *Zikr*

The *marsiyah* comes to an end and the *zakir*, seated on a raised seat (*minbar*), begins the final portion of the first part of the mourning assembly. This is the *zikr* or recollection of the sufferings of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. The *zikr* has a topical focus, which is usually determined by the date and the individual being commemorated. In other parts of the subcontinent such as Karachi, this portion of the *majlis* is known as *hadis-khwani* (narration of events), which is performed by a *hadis-khwan*. The first part of the discourse extols the virtues (*fazaʾil*) of the Ahl-e Bait, integrating verses from the Qurʾan, poetry, and *hadith*, as well as other literary sources. The second half of the *zikr* brings the mourning assembly participants to tears as the sufferings (*masaʾib*) of the Ahl-e Bait are described in detail using deeply intimate and emotional language.

On 15 Safar 1420 (31 May 1999), a *zakirah* named Asgari [sic] Hussain Begum delivered a discourse about the martyrdom of Imam Husain's 18-year-old son ʿAli Akbar. Asgari's discourse begins with a famous *hadith* attesting to the closeness between the Prophet Muhammad and his grandson Husain. The first part of the narrative relates an act of intercession performed by the youthful Husain that intersects with the origin story of the Husaini Brahmins narrated in Chapter 1.

> Ḥusayn has a very high position with God. The will of Ḥusayn and the will of God are one and the same. What God wants is what Ḥusayn also wants, and what Ḥusayn wills, God will bring to pass…
>
> There was an incident during Ḥusayn's childhood that illustrates this point. The Prophet was sitting in the mosque at Madina one day when one of his companions came to him and said, "O Prophet of God!… I have come to you with great hope wanting you to pray for me." The Prophet replied, "My son, what is your need?" The man said, "I have been married for a long time, but we have no children." … The Prophet prayed for this man, and at that moment (the angel) Gabriel came down. Gabriel said to the Prophet, "It is written in the 'Preserved Tablet' [*Lawhe Mahfûz*], that this man is destined to be without children…"
>
> Meanwhile a small prince (i.e. Ḥusayn as a child) came into the mosque. He looked into the face of the companion and, seeing his grief, he asked the man what was the matter. The man replied, "God has destined that I should have no children, so I came to ask your grandfather to pray for me. But your grandfather told me that it is not written that I should have children." … Ḥusayn said, "O Grandfather! I will give this man a child." Then the Prophet said again to Ḥusayn, "O my dear son Ḥusayn! God has not written this." … The conversation went on in this way until Ḥusayn said that he would give the man seven children. When Ḥusayn had said that he would give the man seven children, Gabriel again appeared and said to the Prophet, "O Prophet of God! God orders you to stop this! Even if Ḥusayn were to continue like this until the Day of Resurrection, I would have to keep on giving children!" This is the greatness [ʿ*azmat*] of Ḥusayn.
>
> (Howarth 2005, 94–95)

This is the *fazaʾil* portion of the discourse. Asgari Hussain Begum stops somewhat abruptly to exhort the Shiʿa attending the *majlis* that now is the time for people to sacrifice their lives for the cause of Husain. Remember, Husain's descendants suffered terribly under the reign of the ʿAbbasid caliph Mutawwakil

(r. 847–861), who was an avowed enemy of the Shiʿa. Asgari tells of a mother who lost her son because of the Caliph's tyranny, just as ʿAli Akbar's mother lost her handsome, youthful son on the battlefield of Karbala. Thus begins the *masaʾib*, which describes Akbar's terrible thirst, his premonition of impending martyrdom, and the grievous moment when Husain saw the spark of life drain from his beloved son's body.

While the themes and narratives connected to the discourses of the mourning assembly are typically limited to events from the battle of Karbala and martyrdom of the Imams and the Ahl-e Bait, *zakirs* and *zakirahs* are expected to be creative and engaging in their performance. A good *zakir* must be able to read his audience and instantly draw on a vast repertoire of topics, memorized religious texts, and poetry in order to connect with diverse groups of *majlis* participants. People attend dozens of mourning assemblies during Muharram and expect a *zakir* or *zakirah* to produce new and different ways to bring the heroes and villains of the Karbala drama to life.

Mourning for Husain: *Nauhah* Recitation

While tears shed from hearing the orator's account of the hardships (*masaʾib*) of the Ahl-e Bait are still fresh on the faces of participants, the second segment of the mourning assembly begins with the recitation of short *nauhah* poems. These poems tend to be episodic in nature and focus on single moments and exchanges between individuals. Because of their rhythmic tone, *nauhahs* are usually recited as an accompaniment for the performance of *matam*, although not always (as discussed in Chapter 2). There are many *nauhahs* that have explicitly ideological or didactic themes, such as the importance of praying or reading the Qurʾan. Most *nauhah* emphasize the suffering of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait and take incidents from the Karbala cycle as their subject. They are written in simple Urdu that draws the listener into the emotion of the moment, causing one to weep and to strike the body in grief.

Ziyarat: Prayers of Salutation to the Fourteen Infallibles

After the *nauhahs* have been recited and *matam* has been performed to mourn Imam Husain and other Karbala martyrs, final prayers are recited. This is the concluding act in the standing second half of the *majlis*, when everyone performs prayers of salutation, known as *ziyarat*, to the graves of the Fourteen Infallibles (*chardah maʿsumin*). This term is closely connected to the act of pilgrimage or visitation, *ziyarah*, that devotees perform to the shrine-tombs of Imams and saints. Standing with the left hand behind one's back and the right hand to the front, one first stands in the direction of the demolished Jannat al-Baqiʿ cemetery in Medina where Fatimah al-Zahra and four other Imams were buried.[11]

Ziyarat of Imam Husain

Peace be upon you, Imam Husain (Aba ʿAbdilla)

Peace be upon you, son of the Holy Prophet

Peace be upon you, son of the Commander of the Faithful (Amiral-Muʾminin)

Peace be upon you, son of Fatimah al-Zahra

Peace be upon you, Abu Fazl al-ʿAbbas

Peace be upon you, the mercy of God and His bounty

Ziyarat of Imam ʿAli ibn Musa al-Reza

Peace be upon you, who lives far from his domain

Peace be upon you, ʿAli ibn Musa al-Reza

Peace be upon you, the mercy of God and His bounty

Ziyarat of Imam Mahdi

Peace be upon you, king of the time and the age

Peace be upon you, Imam of men and jinn (ins wa jinn)

Peace be upon you, companion of the Qurʾan

Provide assurance of protection

Peace be upon you, the mercy of God and His bounty

O God, bless Muhammad and the Family of Muhammad.

Now the formal program of the *majlis* is complete. *Majlis* participants enjoy blessed food called *tabarruk*, which may be as simple as a piece of bread or an elaborate dish of rice and meat. Some mourning assemblies are particularly renowned for its tasty *tabarruk*. In Hyderabad, I have received mutton (goat meat) *biryani* in a small ceramic pot as *tabarruk* from a large *zanani* mourning assembly hosted by the prominent orator Dr. Zakia Sultana. I have also had the vegetarian *biryani* made with eggplant and potato served on 7 Muharram at the famous henna mourning assembly (*mehndi ki majlis*) at Dr. M.M. Taqui Khan's large domestic courtyard ʿ*ashurkhanah*. Elsewhere, I have received *tabarruk* of chilled Rooh Afza[12] or a packet containing a piece of *shirmal*, a white bread enriched with milk, sugar, clarified butter (*ghi*), and leavened with yeast. *Majlis* participants often bring home a portion of their *tabarruk* to share with family members who were unable to attend as a means of sharing in the blessedness of the event.

Processions

While the *majlis* is the most significant part of Muharram mourning ritual (ʿ*azadari*), the mourning processions or *julus* that take place on 9 and 10 Muharram are highly visible signs of Shiʿi devotion to the Karbala heroes. Processions may be small and limited to the streets of a neighborhood associated

with the Muharram association (*anjuman* or *guruh*). Large-scale processions may involve thousands of participants walking many kilometers through multiple neighborhoods in a city, such as Karachi's *ʿashura* procession that begins at Nishtar Park and travels through the city to the Imambargah Hussanian Iranian in Kharadar (see Figure 5.02).

Processions are highly visual and visible events by which allegiance and love for the Imams and Ahl-e Bait is demonstrated. Banners (*patka*), flags (*jhanda* and *parcham*), *ʿalams*, replicas of Imam Husain's coffin (*tabut*), and *taʿziya* are carried by young men and boys, and on 10 Muharram in many parts of North India and Pakistan, a horse representing Zuljanah is taken out in procession. Accompanying these devotional objects are groups of young men affiliated with groups that perform self-flagellation during Muharram. These groups are self-flagellation associations, known as *matami anjuman* in North India and Pakistan, and are known as *matami guruh* (pl. *guruhan*) in South India, especially in Hyderabad. Each *matam* association has its own technique for performing the barehanded style of *matam*. For example, the Guruh-e Jaʿfari, Hyderabad's oldest *matam* association, founded in 1884, employs the "Irani style" of self-flagellation. This two-handed style involves extending both arms straight above the head and dropping both hands hard on the chest simultaneously. According to David Pinault, who has extensively researched men's Muharram associations in Hyderabad, this is the most physically demanding style of *matam* (Pinault 1992, 111). A focal point of Muharram processions are groups of men and boys dressed in black striking their chests, back, and heads with their hands and with implements such as razor blades and flails, an outpouring of their love for the heroes of Karbala and a physical inscribing of their love and loyalty for the Ahl-e Bait on their bodies.



Figure 5.02 Muharram procession, Karachi.

Photo by Mohammad Nabeel Jafri, 2019.

Matam: Inscribing Love for the Ahl-e Bait on the Body

In February 2005 on the sunny morning of ʿ*ashura*, I left my sandals at the entrance to the Bargah-e ʿAbbas ʿ*ashurkhanah*. It did not occur to me that several hours from now, the stone floors of the ʿ*ashurkhanah's* courtyard would be slick with a thick layer of blood and rosewater that I would have to navigate. As the sun shone brightly, the electric blue sky contrasted sharply with blood, red

as a rose, flowing from the chests and foreheads of the hundreds of men packed together in the Bargah's stone-floored courtyard. From the rooftop, dozens of women, encompassed by the wafting odors of blood and rosewater, gathered to observe these men crowded together below, stripped to the waist, performing *matam*, flagellating themselves, at first with open palms, soon replaced with razor blades and knives in time to the chanted poems of mourning recited by the *nauhah-khwan* and his accompanists. The women maintained a lively commentary on the men's performance and *matam* technique, and the men likewise devoted considerable attention not only to their bodies but also to those of their fellow *matamdars* (flagellants). Through the performance of *matam*, these men did not weep, instead they demonstrated a positive excess of love for Imam Husain and the family of the Prophet Muhammad.

Every Place Is Karbala

The performance of *matam* is not rooted in feelings of guilt and penance, nor is it based on a subjunctive mode of "If I had been there then…," but rather it is based primarily on an ethic of love and caring. Through the performance of *matam* Shiʿa demonstrate their loyalty to the Ahl-e Bait, and it is an efficacious tool for spiritual growth and for reaffirming family and social ties. How do these outpourings of love occur and by what logic? How does the scourging of the body with knives, blades and flails constitute a positive act of social integration that reaffirms family ties? Furthermore, how are acts such as cutting the head with a knife (*qamah zani*), striking the chest with blades or flails (*sinah zani*), or weeping signs of how the Shiʿa excel in their devotion to Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait? Such questions are destabilizing and have been the source of considerable polemical discourse within Shiʿi communities and from critics outside in Sunni and non-Muslim communities regarding what is perceived as the excessive, violent, and transgressive nature of the performance of bloody *matam*.

In South Asia, a clear distinction must be made between a number of affective modes that make Karbala immediate and render Imam Husain's sacrifice an event of the present. The hypervisibility of the Shiʿi practice of self-flagellation

on Muharram in South Asia has captured scholarly attention since the 1990s. Scholars have offered several interpretive models to explain Shiʿi motivations for drawing blood as a means of showing one's devotion to Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait. The models that scholars have used endeavor to explain how this Shiʿi ritual makes the absent Imam present. The first model is the "subjunctive mood." The subjunctive mode (what Victor Turner calls a "mood") is predicated on its grammatical prototype, "*If* I had been at Karbala, *then* I would have sacrificed my life for the cause of Husain." The subjunctive mode is based on the anthropologist Victor Turner's theory of the ritual process, in which Turner describes the liminal zone as the space between one's past identity and that which is impending. The *limin* is the subjunctive space of the "*what* if," more specifically, of the open-endedness and uncertainty of the "*what could be*" reflecting the particularity of one's needs, wishes, and desires (Turner 1969, vii). The subjunctive mode deeply influenced Vernon Schubel's 1993 ethnography of Karachi Shiʿi Muharram ritual. I ask whether the subjunctive actually exists for a Shiʿi devotee? Without a doubt, a true devotee would have been at Karbala with Imam Husain and his family. By virtue of participating in the *majlis* year after year, weeping, and performing *matam*, a devotee enters into the Karbala time-space continuum, sharing in brief moments of joy, and the endless suffering of Husain and his family on the battlefield.

The second model based on the Roman Catholic model of penitence has also deep influence on studies of Shiʿi *matam*. David Pinault (1992 and 1999) has explored the penitential dimension of Muharram rituals, describing communal feelings of guilt as being expressed through acts of self-mutilation with hands, swords, blades, and flails. Pinault characterizes the mourners as latter-day *tawwabun* (penitents), who perform self-flagellation in order to "atone for the failure of the seventh-century Shiite community to come to Husain's aid in time" (Pinault 1992, 106). Pinault's representation of Shiʿi motivations for the performance of *matam* is inflected by Catholic theology, which one sees throughout his 1992 book *The Shiites*.

Matam is performed by the "lovers" (*mahabban*) of the Ahl-e Bait. Muharram rituals such as *matam* are fundamentally translocative and transtemporal, simultaneously blurring and "orienting" devotees in space and time because Muharram rituals are highly structured events. Here, I follow Tom Tweed's definition of the translocative and transtemporal, switching out Miami and Havana for Hyderabad and Karbala: "The rituals, narratives and artifacts at the shrine transport them back and forth between [Karbala] and [Hyderabad] and move them back and forth between a constructed past and imagined future. It moves them across" (Tweed 2002, 263). Each year during Muharram, bodies and material objects operate to cross over and collapse terrestrial and temporal boundaries for the Shiʿa, transforming South Asian towns and cities into localized Karbalas. Through the narratives of the *majlis*, gazing on ʿ*alams*, and performing *matam* in the ʿ*ashura julus* (procession), the cycle of life, death, and eschatological hope for divine justice and reward is set in perpetual motion year after year. The translocative dimension of Muharram and *matam* ritual is vividly described by Ansar ʿAbidi, a Shiʿa police officer in Hyderabad, "This is what is in the hearts and minds of these men as they transport themselves back to the banks of the river Euphrates, to the fields of Karbala… Many of these young men you see here are not really here. In their minds they have traveled back to Karbala. They are waiting for the battle to start" (D'Souza 2010, 169). Karbala is made immediate (not subjunctive), nor is the performance of *matam* an act of painful (and shame-filled) penance performed for the disloyalty of the Kufans.

Performing Love for Husain

The ways in which bodies are culturally and socially conditioned by religious traditions relates to the integral connection between "*living and acting*" (Magnat 2002, 147). In European and North American performance studies, there has been a shift away from the perception of theatre as fiction and therefore false – the product of the playwright's imagination – to the reality of performance as representative of the lived experience. The theatrical and the performative are fused in Muharram ritual.

The theatrical dimension of *matam* and other Muharram rituals is reflected in the very nature of these acts (of its actedness). Dressing in black clothing, going about without shoes or jewelry, and eating vegetarian food are forms of role-playing that cast one into several possible roles: mourner, ascetic, supplicant, lover. These roles are taken up only temporarily, yet the performance helps to cultivate a mode of behavior and ethics that lasts throughout the year. In his study of *faqiri* rituals dedicated to the saint Kullyappa in the village of Gugudu in Andhra Pradesh, Afsar Mohammad has observed the transformation of theatricality (acting) into performance (living). Asked about how temporary asceticism affects its performers, one man explained the transformative process thus: "Since we have been doing this *faqiri* for several years, it's like it has seeped deep into our minds, as water into the soil. Now I cannot separate it from my personality … Three days of *faqiri* provides you with a model for observing various acts of purity in everyday life" (Mohammad 2010, 158). Likewise, the performance of *matam* is explicitly theatrical (physically inscribing one's love for Husain on the body). A *matamdar* is not literally going to kill himself to prove his love for Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait – that would be a pointless and suicidal act of theatricality. The performance (living) is an ethical and social affirming of connections with family and friends, the Imams and Ahl-e Bait.

I am likewise reminded of an experience my husband Andreas D'Souza had when he was the director of the Henry Martyn Institute (HMI) in Hyderabad from 1992–2008. HMI is a research institute that offers graduate degrees and certificates in Islamic studies, and the institute does extensive conflict transformation work throughout India and abroad, It has established innovative community development projects to bring together Hindus and Muslims in some of the poorest neighborhoods in Hyderabad's Old City. For a number of years in the 1990s, Andreas volunteered for a medical camp that members of the Shiʿi community organized on ʿ*ashura* to help devotees who injured themselves performing *matam* or fainted from blood loss and sun exposure. Andreas's description of his experience working at the medical camp, observing men

striking their chests and heads with knives and blades in time to mournful *nauhah* poems, demonstrates the merging of the theatrical and the performative:

> At a given moment, one of the custodians of the shrine approached the raised platform where an ʿ*alam* – the revered battle standard, in this case dedicated to ʿAbbas – has been displayed for veneration. Lifting it high and turning to the crowd, he makes his way slowly forward as the *nawha* gain a heightened pitch and young men start frantically striking their foreheads with well-sharpened knives. Blood flows at a faster pace, spraying the bodies of the *matami guruh* (group performing *matam*) as mourners surge forward to touch the advancing ʿ*alam*. For a moment there is utter confusion, as young men slash at their foreheads, while others struggle to wrench the knife away. Back at the health camp there is a sudden flurry of activity as men are brought in blinded by the blood of a too-deep wound, stumbling on a leg with a foot-long gash, clumsily cradling a mutilated thumb. It is a veritable battlefield scene, with the same intensity, the same searing pain, and the same sense of tragedy. The only difference is that these wounds are all self-inflicted in a moment when boundaries between the seventh century and the twentieth dissolve and disappear.
>
> (D’Souza 2010, 169)



Figure 5.03 Procession of ʿAbbas ʿ*alam* and *matam* at Bargah-e ʿAbbas, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2005.

In this description of the *matam* performance at the Bargah-e ʿAbbas on ʿ*ashura*, D'Souza likewise observed the translocative and transtemporal nature of this ritual in which time and space are collapsed (see Figure 5.03).

Matam as a Moral Contract

During the *majlis*, when bloody *matam* is replaced with *hath ka matam*, striking the chest, head, and thighs with the hands, there is often a spontaneous outpouring of grief (*ʿazadari*) that produces profound tears (*giryan*) and sorrow (*gham*). The devotee's sobs and percussive beat of *matam* on the body is in perfect syncopation to the rhythm of the *majlis* orator's (*zakir*) narrative of the calamity of Karbala (*masaʾib*) and the rhymed tragedy chanted in a heartbreaking tone in the *nauhah* poems. When the trouble-telling narrative (*masaʾib*) reaches its dramatic climax – martyrdom – and suddenly concludes, so too, does the weeping and *hath ka matam*. As faces are wiped, people emit deep sighs, and for a brief moment, a cathartic hush fills the *ʿashurkhanah*, in which the sense of pleasure for having felt such an upwelling of passionate love and outpouring of grief for the Ahl-e Bait spreads over the Shiʿa gathered in the assembly.

These tears and outpouring of grief may appear to the casual observer unaccustomed to such intense displays of emotion as at best scripted, or at worst fake "crocodile tears," *makkari* (Bard 2005, 154). How can someone burst into tears so suddenly and be so overwhelmed as to strike her thighs as she is wracked with sobs at the moment the *zakirah* begins to narrate the sufferings of one of the heroes of the battle of Karbala? Admittedly, when I was first doing fieldwork and attending the *majlis* I did not fully understand the multiplicity of action that takes place when the *matamdar* sheds tears and strikes her body with her hand during the recitation of the *masaʾib* or *nauhah*. For the Shiʿa, *matamdari* and its emotional affects are a *naturalized* performance because one hears (and feels) the suffering of Imam Husain and his family at the battle of Karbala as it is remembered in the *majlis* from the mother's womb. When children attend the *majlis* they run around and play games – it seems that they are hardly attending to the ritual emotion and action of the *majlis*. Yet, if one pays close attention, you will see a little boy striking his forehead with conscious deliberation and looking to his father for correction or approval, as the case may be. In another mourning assembly, perhaps a little girl is struggling to cry, knowing that the suffering of

the children at Karbala was terrible. What is significant is that each child is immersed in an environment saturated in the constant memory and love for the Ahl-e Bait that is expressed through the ethic of hospitality and love for family members both real and fictive.

As these children grow, their life experiences and their constant presence in the *majlis* will produce two significant transformations of her tears and his performance of bloody *matam*. First, as they grow older they will have more of their own life experiences that will cause them to expand their fictive kin network to include the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. The tears and blood that are shed in *matam* are forms of hospitality and generosity that one learns to give to one's kin, respected guests, and those in need. During Muharram throughout the Shiʿi world, tents are erected where charitable organizations and families distribute water, milk, and sweet *sharbats* known as *sabil*, which is considered an especially pious act of liquescent hospitality. Because the hero[in]es of Karbala were denied access to the Euphrates River for three days before the final battle on 10 Muharram (ʿ*ashura*), thirst is a ubiquitous theme. For this reason, the tears and blood shed by the Shiʿa during ʿ*azadari* are not polluting, but rather nourishing, sustaining substances offered to the Ahl-e Bait as a sign of love.

Second, as Shiʿa develop extensive kin networks that are inclusive of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, weeping and *matam* acquire a moral valence. The soteriological value of weeping for the Ahl-e Bait has received considerable scholarly attention, yet one critical aspect has not been sufficiently examined. Shedding tears and blood and striking the body establish a moral contract between the Shiʿi lover and the Ahl-e Bait. The loving action of the devotee compels the attention now, in the form of intercession in matters of health, family matters, education, and careers, and also in the eschatological future in rewarding such love and loyalty with the pleasures of Paradise.

The aesthetic of pleasure and its cultivation through the performance of *matam* is exemplified through the process by which boys learn to flagellate themselves during Muharram. Like a method actor training for a role, boys must learn the theatricality of the performance of *matam* as an aesthetically pleasing, socially

affirming, masculine ritual performance. When a little boy learns how to perform *matam* his experience is passive and initially painful and even disconcerting. From whom does he learn to strike his body? *Matam* is considered to be an explicitly masculine ritual, yet women also participate in vigorous forms of self-flagellation, which I have observed in Karachi.

In February and March 2009, I was in Karachi at the conclusion of the more than two months of the Shiʿi mourning period that begins with Muharram and ends on 8 Rabiʿ al-Awwal. I attended a number of mourning assemblies sponsored by Khoja Shiʿi associations held around the Pakistan Electrical Cooperative Housing Society (PECHS) enclave, where I observed women perform a particularly vigorous and extended form of *matam* by which they struck their chests and thighs with their hands (*hath ka matam*). In some *majlis*, this lasted for an extended period, demonstrating considerable feats of endurance. The *matam* performed by these women was unlike anything I had ever seen in Hyderabad. Mary Elaine Hegland's research among different groups of women in Peshawar affirms that the performance of *matam* is not solely a masculine ritual performance among Pakistani Shiʿa. According to Hegland, ethnic Pashtun women perform an especially "arduous facial self-flagellation, swinging their hands together from above to strike their cheekbones"; migrant Shiʿi women (the *muhajirs* who came from India during the 1947 Partition) focus more during this period on the ethical attunements of mourning and sacrifice, refraining from wearing joyful colors or makeup, and they occasionally perform *hath ka matam* in the mourning assembly. During Muharram, Qizilbash[13] women traditionally performed their *majlis* in Persian. The *matam* they performed did not go beyond a gentle tapping of the chest, and the recitation of the suffering of Imam Husain and his family was such that it did not provoke tears in the women (Hegland 1998b, 406–408; see also Hegland 1998a for further discussion of women's *matam* ritual in Pakistan). Hegland has observed that religiopolitical forces have pressured Qizilbash women to observe the *majlis* in Urdu, to weep and strike the body more forcefully to show their allegiance to Husain's cause. For Shiʿi

women, *matam* is *doxa* and cultural memory is to be inscribed on the bodies of future generations (condensed from Ruffle 2015).

Conclusion

The remembrance of Imam Husain's martyrdom at the battle of Karbala is the foundation of South Asian Shiʿi cultural memory. The rituals of the *majlis* and the performance of *matam* transport Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait across time into the present, and the poetry and discourses of the orators (*zakir*) translocate Karbala to a South Asian milieu.

ʿ*Alam* and *taʿziya* processions, together with the *matam* performed in time to the rhythmic chanting of *nauhah* are public Muharram rituals that have made the micro-minority Shiʿi community in South Asia hyper-visible. The ten days leading up to ʿ*ashura* and extending to more than two months devoted to commemorating the events of Karbala show the depth of Shiʿi love, loyalty, and devotion to the memory of Imam Husain and his family during the Muharram period of mourning. Muharram and its rituals are the focal point of South Asian everyday Shiʿism, a period of intense sadness and also of community renewal through devotion to Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait and learning from their exemplary model of piety, sacrifice, and commitment to justice.

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Theoretical Lessons

- Representation refers to the processes by which we construct, present, and understand different aspects of reality that are around us. Representations take on different cultural forms and practices, which use specific languages and sets of signs to say something about the world to others. The rituals associated with Muharram, primarily *matam* and the procession of *taʿziyas* and *ʿalams*, acquired primary representational power for foreign observers in the subcontinent from the sixteenth century through the colonial period. Representation works to make something seem "natural" and "normal," while at the same time always being an incomplete action.
- Self-flagellation (*matam*) rituals are simultaneously theatrical and performative. The theatrical acts one performs during Muharram, including wearing black clothing, eating vegetarian food, and going about without shoes, helps to cultivate a longer-term ethical and behavioral disposition (performance) of devotion and care for the Imams, Ahl-e Bait, and community that extends throughout the year.

Notes

1 ʿAbbas's name, Abu Fazl, is what is known in the Muslim world as a *kunya*, an honorific title that is given to the father (*abu*) or mother (*umm*) of a child. Abu Fazl, means "the father of" a son named Fazl. The popularity of this name for ʿAbbas reflects his status as a father and a "family man," connected to this world by his wife and children.

2 Bridegroom! Bridegroom!

3 For an extended discussion of the concept of *husaini* ethics, see Ruffle 2011.

4 Rabiʿ al-Awwal is the third month of the Islamic (*hijri*) calendar. The *ayyam-e ʿaza* (days of mourning) begin on 1 Muharram and extend for a full two

months eight days, through the second month of Safar, until 8 Rabiʿ al-Awwal.

5 One encounters two lunar terms in reference to the beginning of Muharram, *hilal-e* Muharram and *chand rat*, which have slightly different connotations in ritual and everyday contexts and are deserving of brief explanation. *Hilal* is a Perso-Arabic word referring to either the waning moon in its final two days, or the new, crescent moon in its first two days. During the rest of the month, the moon is usually referred to as *qamar* (as its waxes and wanes from the third day until the last two days of the month). Referring to the new moon of Muharram with the Perso-Arabic term, *hilal*, emphasizes the Muslim foundation of the event. *Chand*, on the other hand, is a Sanskrit-derived word for moon, and *chand rat* refers to the new moon of any month. *Chand rat* also has additional significance for Muslims as this is the feast celebrating the end of the fasting month of Ramazan. ʿId al-Fitr, which begins on 1 Shawwal, is also called *chand rat* by South Asian Muslims, and marks the beginning of days of visiting relatives and friends, savoring special foods, exchanging gifts, and wearing new clothing. In Pakistan and Bangladesh ʿId is a three-day holiday; in multi-religious India, it is a Gazetted holiday allocated one day off.

6 Later in this chapter I will discuss the ways in which collective self-flagellation (*matam*) is an act of love for the Ahl-e Bait.

7 Jaʿfri was an Indian short-story writer, poet, documentary filmmaker, and cultural critic.

8 The Ravi River flows along the northern side of the city of Lahore, which is an important center for Shiʿi culture and ritual in post-Partition Pakistan.

9 This type of mourning assembly will be briefly discussed in Chapter 6 on vows and festive occasions.

10 These may be mourning assemblies that also serve as community meetings to mediate issues of concern or serve to affirm communal harmony (Howarth

2005, 43). In such instances, the *majlis* is used to negotiate sectarian and inter-religious conflict or the potential for it happening during Muharram.

11 The cemetery was first damaged in 1806 by Wahhabis, later refurbished and again permanently razed in 1926 by the Wahhabi-sponsored House of Saʿud. Jannat al-Baqiʿ held the graves of Fatimah al-Zahra, the second Imam Hasan ibn ʿAli, the fourth Imam ʿAli ibn Husain (Zain al-ʿAbidin), the fifth Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, and the sixth Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq.

12 Rooh Afza is a concentrated syrup or *sharbat* that is mixed with water or iced milk and is often served to break the fast (*iftar*) during Ramzan or as a *sabil* during Muharram. Rooh Afza is produced by Hamdard, a company manufacturing Unani and Ayurvedic medicines in Pakistan and India. The *sharbat* is endowed with cooling properties based on a blend of herbs, fruits, vegetables, roots, and flowers.

13 The Qizilbash have Turkic tribal origins who, because of their Shiʿi orientation, were instrumental in the expansion of the Safavid dynasty in Iran. Over the centuries, Qizilbash warriors attained positions in the Mughal army and settled throughout South Asia. Persian-speaking Qizilbash live throughout Pakistan and primarily identify as Twelver Shiʿa, although there is a sizable minority who claim Sunni Hanafi status.

6

Tasting Sorrow before Joy: Vow-Making and Festival Occasions

In 2005 I spent many days in the salon of historian, poet, and *zakir* Dr. Sadiq Naqvi, learning about the history of Shiʿism in Hyderabad. Dr. Naqvi, who died in 2017, was an extraordinarily generous mentor, willing to spend hours

discussing Urdu poetry, Shiʿi history, and the meaning of local architecture and ritual practices. He introduced me to local *marsiyah* poets, and even helped me organize a performance of their new poetic compositions. It was always a great pleasure to sit around and chat about anything and everything with the men who came to see this man so deeply connected to and involved with his Shiʿi community. One day, we were chatting with another man about upcoming events in the ritual calendar and I made a comment that the coming weeks seemed particularly event-filled. Dr. Naqvi's friend joked that almost half the year, so it seems, is devoted to taking time off to attend *majlis* mourning assemblies, and even more time for celebratory events. He laughed, saying this is why we are so poor. He said, so much time is spent in devotion to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait that little time is left for work. We all laughed, for this was said by a deeply religious man who meant no disrespect. Rather, his comment reflected the extent that Shiʿi devotion to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait shapes everyday life.

This chapter weaves together themes introduced in earlier chapters in this book, reconsidering them outside of a mourning context. Vows and supplicatory prayers are central to women's everyday religious practice. A miracle story (*muʿjizah kahani*) told about a faithful woodcutter is part of the *kunde ki niyaz* votive meal held on 22 Rajab in honor of Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, which is hosted and organized by women. The *dastarkhwan* is a women-only votive meal that is held in the name of an Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait to seek help in solving a problem or in fulfilment of a vow. Women also participate in cycles of prayer called ʿ*amal* for blessing and intercession that is based on a hagiographical tradition about Fatimah al-Zahra in which she was instructed to pray to God for his aid, as we have already seen in *Janab-e sayyidah ki kahani*, "The Story of Lady Fatimah." These rituals reaffirm women's faith in the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, while also providing socially sanctioned space to air their difficulties and seek resolution for their problems.

Celebrations and festive events, known as *jashn* and ʿ*id*, are also important ways to remember and affirm loyalty and love for the Imams and Ahl-e Bait for South Asian Shiʿa. Such joyful events do not take place without first remembering and

mourning the sacrifices and suffering of Imam Husain and his family. Every joyful occasion is prefaced with a brief *majlis* mourning assembly. One explanation I have heard many times for the need for sorrow before joy is that without the constant remembrance of Karbala and Zainab being the messenger of Husain's martyrdom, the religion would not have survived. Sorrow or joy would be irrelevant because Shiʿism would not exist. Thus, even sorrowful memory is one of victory of Shiʿism over political tyranny.

Sweet Blessings: The *Niyaz* of Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq on 22 Rajab

Shaikh ʿAbbas Qommi's (d. 1940) twentieth-century Arabic-language *Mafatih al-janan* (The keys to the heavens) is popular throughout the Shiʿi world for being an accessible compilation of supplications, practices of the days,[1] and *ziyarats* to be performed for the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. *Mafatih al-janan* is translated into Urdu and copies can be found in *imambaras* and in the homes of pious Shiʿa throughout South Asia. Writing about the month of Rajab, Shaikh ʿAbbas Qommi cites a *hadith* (report) narrated by the Prophet Muhammad that asserts Rajab is the month of God in which fighting is prohibited.[2] Rajab is a particularly auspicious month for fasting, which will be greatly rewarded by God. Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq described Rajab as the name of a paradisiacal river as sweet as honey and white as milk. The faithful who fast during Rajab will be given to drink from this heavenly river by God, according to Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. As a blessed period of contemplation and repentance, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq explained that the month is one of excessive outpouring, "al-Rajab al-Asabb." For those who repent, fast, and seek God's mercy, they shall receive it in abundance.

God calls on believers (*muʾminin*) to enter into a period of spiritual contemplation during the month of Rajab and to reaffirm one's faith. For Shiʿa, the spiritual power of Rajab is amplified by the call to reaffirm loyalty to the Imams and denounce the enemies of the Ahl-e Bait. Adding to the significance of

22 Rajab is that this is also the death anniversary for the first ʿUmayyad caliph Muʿawiyyah ibn Abi Sufyan (d. 680, Yazid's father), which lends the date a sense of the triumph of good over tyranny. On 22 Rajab, a special supplication (*niyaz*) is performed in Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's name, which is popularly known as *kunde* for the earthen or clay pot in which pudding-like sweets are prepared and served with fried breads.

Early in the morning on 22 Rajab, devotees are instructed to prepare their house and bodies for the ritual. First, the house is thoroughly cleaned and tidied. All of the dishes, pots, pans, and serving utensils that will be used for the *niyaz* must be spotlessly clean. A clean white cloth (*farsh*) should be spread over the freshly cleaned floor. The air in the house is to be purified with incense. After completing these tasks, the devotee is to take a full bath (*ghusl*) and put on clean clothes and apply perfume (*ʿitr*). Now, it is time to prepare the sweet dishes for the *niyaz*; mix together 1 ¼ *ser*[3] of white flour (*maida*) with an equal amount of sugar and add water and knead into a dough. Divide the dough into fourteen pieces (symbolizing the twelve Imams, the Prophet Muhammad, and Fatimah) and roll flat. These sweet *puris*, called *tikiyyan*, are deep fried in a quarter *ser* (*pao*) of clarified butter (*ghi*). One should also prepare a batch of unsweetened breads by preparing the same dough without sugar to make *puri*. The *puri* and *tikiyyan* are served with rice pudding, called *khir*, or semolina *halwa*, which is served in an earthen dish (*kunde*). These special foods should face the *qiblah*, or the direction pointing toward Mecca, and all devotees participating in the *niyaz* should point in the same direction (Schubel 1993, 68–69). At this point, one should three times recite the *salawat* (also known as the *durud*), "O God, bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad" before telling the miracle story (*muʿjizah kahani*) of Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, which is popularly known as "The Woodcutter's Tale," (previously introduced in Chapter 2). Here I translate the miracle story from an Urdu book, titled *Chardah muʿjize* (The fourteen miracles), compiled by A.H. Rizvi and sold in Karachi.

“The Woodcutter’s Tale”

Once upon a time in some town, there lived an extremely impoverished woodcutter. Each day, that unfortunate man went to the forest where he cut and brought wood to sell. With difficulty, he managed to fill the stomachs of his children and himself. His poverty caused distress and, one day, he said to his wife, “I am going to leave and find work, which will come not by some miracle, but by God’s command and compassion, our suffering will be removed.” Saying this, the woodcutter stood up, and set off in search of work in another town.

When the woodcutter arrived in that new town, Divine Providence was not with him and he was unable to find work. Twelve years passed in such circumstances in which worry, trouble, and poverty did not abandon him. For this reason, he was unable to send anything to his wife and children. Following her husband’s departure, the woodcutter’s wife subsisted for a while, however, when she was close to starvation, this wretched woman was forced to take on work as a sweeper in the *wazir’s* (chief minister) palace, and only then was she able to fill her children’s bellies. One night, the woodcutter’s wife had a dream in which she saw herself sweeping in the *wazir’s* palace when the lord of the universe (*mawla-e kaʾinat*), Hazrat Imam Jaʿfar-e Sadiq (A.S.), came into the courtyard (*sahn-khanah*) with some companions. He turned his attention to his companions and asked, “Do you know today’s date and which month this is?” With consummate politeness, they replied, “Lord! Tonight, is the twenty-second of Rajab, the honored (*al-murajab*).” Then, Jaʿfar (*hazrat*) said, “If anyone is hemmed in by their problems or anyone is entangled in troubles, or afflicted with calamity, with a sincere heart (*ba-sidq-e dil*), prepare 1 ¼ *ser* of white flour *puris* (or, if it is possible, then prepare sweet *puris*) in two clay pots and give them in my name as a *niyaz* [supplicatory offering, or *nazr*] on 22 Rajab, the honored, at the time of the morning prayer (*namaz-e subah*). If God wills, then their desires and wishes will surely be fulfilled.” At that moment, the woodcutter’s

wife opened her eyes and with a sincere heart (*ba-sidq-e dil*) she made her intention to offer the *nazr* (*niyaz*), which is what she did.

Now over in the other town, this is what was happening to the woodcutter…

At the same moment on 22 Rajab the honored, during the time of the morning prayer when the woodcutter's wife was performing the *niyaz*, her husband had climbed a tree and was cutting wood. Suddenly, the axe slipped from his hand and fell to the ground. He climbed down from the tree and began to pick up the axe when he saw something resembling a grave. He opened it up and a vast treasure was revealed. He took some of the riches and then closed it up. Bit by bit, however, over a period of time, he extracted the majority of that treasure. Then, he prepared for the return to his homeland with much splendor and pomp.

When he returned home, he had a magnificent house built for his wife and children. He purchased what was needed in order for his family to live a comfortable and enjoyable life, which passed in great tranquility. One day, the woodcutter's wife told her husband the entire account of the *nazr* she had performed for the Imam. When she told him the month and day when this had happened, the woodcutter realized this was on the same day when he had discovered his treasure trove! He was deeply moved and with sincerity of heart, he converted to Islam, and he agreed to always remember that day.

One day, the chief minister's wife climbed out onto her balcony and she saw a magnificent house in the distance that had many maidservants. She asked one of her maids, "Who owns that house?" She replied, "I'm told it belongs to the woman who used to work as a sweeper in the royal palace." Hearing this, the *wazir's* wife summoned the woodcutter's wife to inquire into the details of these circumstances. The woodcutter's wife told the whole story: of her dream, and of performing *niyaz* for Imam Jaʿfar. The *wazir's* wife believed not one word and she thought it was all a lie. She thought, "Her husband has become rich by means of some kind of thievery. She is hiding it

from me!” When this evil thought entered into the heart of this woman, a great calamity befell her husband who was a renowned and noble *wazir*.

The current king’s deputy *wazir* was the chief minister’s enemy. The deputy seized the opportunity to slander him to the king, saying that the chief *wazir* was a traitor who had embezzled greatly from the royal treasury. The king demanded an accounting, which the *wazir* was unable to give. The king became enraged and he confiscated all of the chief minister’s wealth and property. He expelled the *wazir* and his wife from the palace. While on the road they purchased a melon, which they tied up in a handkerchief so they could sit and eat it later.

On the morning of this very day when the chief *wazir* was censured, the prince happened to go out hunting. By evening he had not yet returned. The king was worried. The deputy *wazir*, the same one who had caused the expulsion of the chief minister, said to the king, “I know this much… Perhaps because of reasons of enmity, he seized the opportunity to apprehend the prince and do him harm, and that is why he has not returned home.” Hearing this, the king issued a command that the chief *wazir* be arrested. The king’s cavalry galloped away in all directions and they seized the *wazir* and brought him before the king. Until this moment, he had not yet eaten the melon, which was still tied up as it had been in the handkerchief.

The king asked, “What is in the handkerchief?” The chief *wazir* answered, “It is a melon.” Opening the handkerchief, they saw the prince’s head! Seeing his son’s head, the king was enraged. He issued an order that the *wazir* was to be put in shackles and imprisoned for the night and executed the next morning.

The chief *wazir* and his wife were both thrown in prison. The chief minister said, “I don’t understand how this sudden misfortune and calamity has befallen us. What kind of sin merits such a punishment?” After much thought and consideration, the wife said, “I think that the woodcutter’s wife said that she received her treasure because of doing a votive prayer for Imam Jaʿfar. I

did not believe her at all, and I thought it was all a lie." The chief minister said, "This is a serious matter and surely you have committed an offense; you have given the lie to Hazrat Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq's words and commands. Repent and ask forgiveness. The Imam of the Exalted Station will fix this."

They passed the night weeping and wailing and begging forgiveness for their sins. With a sincere heart (*khulus-e dil se*) they performed the *nazr* of the Imam. Exalted God accepted their repentance. In the morning, the prince returned from hunting and came before the king. The king hugged his son to his breast and asked why he was delayed in returning home. The prince replied, "Lord! It grew late while we were out hunting, so we spent the night in a garden."

After this, the king summoned both of the prisoners, the chief minister, and his wife. They opened the handkerchief and saw the melon inside, which left the king utterly awestruck. The king asked the chief minister what happened, and he relayed what his wife had told him. Then the king summoned the woodcutter and his wife, and he asked them some questions. They explained everything from start to finish. Hearing this, the king, too, with sincerity of heart converted to Islam. The chief *wazir* was reinstated and under his watch, the court reached new heights. The tale-bearing deputy *wazir* was cursed and expelled from the city.

Source: Translated from A.H. Rizvi, *Chardah muʿjize* [Fourteen miracles], (Karachi: Mahfuz Book Agency, 2003), 30-40.

I have participated in the *niyaz* of Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq in Hyderabad and heard "The Woodcutter's Tale" told to us as we sat on the floor around a festively set table with sweet *tikiyyan* and earthen pots filled with delectable rice pudding. After the story is completed, participants pray: the *salawat* five times, the first chapter of the Qurʾan, *al-Fatihah* once, *Surat al-Ikhlas* (112), *Surat al-Qadr* (97), and conclude with a final five *salawat*. Story heard and prayers of supplication completed, the *niyaz* is served.

What do the story, the prayers, and the fact that the *niyaz* is dedicated to Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq mean? There is a palpable connection between the theme of "The Woodcutter's Tale" with the prayers offered before consuming the *niyaz*, all of which is done as a form of supplication to Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq. As I note in Chapter 2, all other South Asian Shiʿi miracle stories are dedicated to either ʿAli or Fatimah al-Zahra. This story does not diverge significantly from the other miracle stories in terms of its emphasis on intentionality in the performance of the *niyaz*. We can understand the significance of the shift in emphasis if we remember that this *niyaz* takes place during Rajab, and the chapters from the Qurʾan that are recited following the recitation of the *kahani* speak to God's glorious power, through which he revealed the Qurʾan (97), and is a unique, uncreated Being (112). The Imams are the human guides who understand the hidden meanings of the Qurʾan, and they are also exemplars of just leadership. The stories, prayers, and food rituals that are performed on 22 Rajab reveal the hidden (*batin*) and manifest (*zahir*) powers of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, and this day's *niyaz* reminds Shiʿa of the dangers that lie in not having faith and the rewards that are promised for those who do.

Women's Votive Practices

Women's participation in the *majlis* mourning assembly and performing *ziyarah* (visitation) to *taʿziyas* at local *imambaras* or to *ʿalams at ʿashurkhanah* forms an important part of their everyday religious life, yet there are numerous rituals that take place in the domestic sphere or women's sacred spaces that also shape the rhythms of daily Shiʿi life in South Asia. In this section, we will explore different facets of women's votive practices that enable them to access the intercessory powers of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. First, we consider a home-based votive ritual centered around a women-only meal called the *dastarkhwan*. Our second example also focuses on a votive act, although the *ʿamal* prayers and their related acts are performed in order to receive blessing and aid in times of difficulty.

Spreading the Cloth for Abu Fazl ʿAbbas: The *Dastarkhwan-e Nazri*

The *dastarkhwan-e nazri* is a domestic supplicatory ritual performed exclusively by women. As a home-based ritual of supplication, food is central to the performance of the *dastarkhwan*. Women seek the intercession of a saintly member of the Ahl-e Bait through the offering and sharing of food, which is known as *niyaz* (also referred to as *nazr* by Shiʿa in some parts of South Asia). As we have seen elsewhere, men also participate in different types of *niyaz* rituals, including the 22 Rajab telling of "The Woodcutter's Tale" and sharing *khir* and *puris*. For the most part, however, these *niyaz* rituals are centered in the home and are organized by women. Unlike other *niyaz* rituals, men are explicitly prohibited from participating in the *dastarkhwan*.

The *dastarkhwan-e nazri* (votive meal) is organized by a woman or the female members of an extended family household in the name of Fatimah al-Zahra, her daughter Zainab, Imam Hasan, Imam Zain al-ʿAbidin, or Imam Husain's half-brother Abu Fazl ʿAbbas, who is especially beloved by South Asian Shiʿa for his devotion to the children of the Karbala entourage. It may seem paradoxical that a *dastarkhwan* might be organized in honor of a male member of the Ahl-e Bait, especially considering the gender segregation of this votive meal is so strictly enforced that even pregnant women are barred from participating, lest she be carrying a male fetus. Selecting a particular Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait to honor with the *dastarkhwan* is a personal choice that is influenced by a number of factors such as an individual's personal relationship with the saint, her particular need at that given moment, and her belief in that saint's ability to intercede. Sometimes it is a matter of tradition and a *dastarkhwan* is held on a particular day in a saint's honor because an individual or family has done so for years. The number of participants in the *dastarkhwan* varies, although the women seated around the floor cloth correspond to numbers that are significant in Shiʿi devotional theology: 5, 12, and 14.

Women host *dastarkhwan* votive meals for a variety of reasons. Women host a votive meal to celebrate the fulfillment of a vow that has already been made. Hosting a *dastarkhwan-e nazri* marks the completion of the reciprocal

obligations of the vow made with the Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait in whose honor the meal is being served. Another basic reason for hosting a *dastarkhwan* is in order to make a new vow, and to create the opportunity for other women participants to also be able to petition the saint to answer her prayers. Women might ask for help in conceiving a child, or in having a son if she has not done so before. Women petition the Imams and Ahl-e Bait to heal themselves and family members from illness, to assist with financial and professional difficulties, and to ensure their children's success in their studies.

A *dastarkhwan* follows a formal four-part structure. (1) *Niyyah: The declaration of intention*. As with other *niyaz* rituals, the *dastarkhwan* opens with a formal declaration of intention by the hostess. She may perform this action in which she states her intentions for hosting the ritual as she is making her preparations, or as the first in the ritual sequence after the guests arrive; this is the hostess's choice. (2) *Duʿa: Prayers and supplications*. The second part of the ritual involves the recitation of supplications and prayers to God, the Imams, and Ahl-e Bait. There is no set textual repertoire for the prayers and supplications that are recited. The hostess is free to select the different types of prayers and supplications that will be read. She may also select brief vignettes from the Karbala story or other narratives that focus on the saintly personage in whose name the *dastarkhwan* is being held. These narrations and prayers are performed while sitting on the *dastarkhwan* floor cloth on which the food is served. (3) *Making mannat*. As the prayers are completed, women have the opportunity to make their own supplications and vows to the saint. (4) *Consumption*. The final part of the ritual involves consumption of the food prepared and presented to the saint in whose name it was prepared (D'Souza 2014, 189–190). Different types of food are prepared and presented for the *dastarkhwan*, usually including breads (*roti* or other types of flat breads) and fruits (bananas, dates), vegetables, and a meat dish such as kabab. For *dastarkhwans* held in Hazrat ʿAbbas's honor, bananas are usually a part of the spread of food because they symbolize Imam Husain's ʿ*alam* (Ghadially 2003, 314). The bananas also resemble his severed arms.

When the *dastarkwhan* is finished, the remainder of the food is distributed to the participants to take home as *tabarruk* to share with family members. It is permissible for men to consume this blessed food (*tabarruk*), once it is no longer in the ritually charged, female-only context of the *dastarkhwan*. There is a belief that if a man should consume this votive food or be present while a *dastarkhwan* is being performed, he will be cursed and suffer harm (Omidsalar 2006).

Dastarkhwan is a powerful and useful ritual method for women to seek the intercession of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, while also being able to give voice to their troubles together with other women. The preparation and cooking of food is a woman's daily responsibility for her family, yet when she does so for an Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait, it is an act of hospitality and offering that provides an opening for the saint to enter into her house. The saint receives the food offerings and prayers and intercedes on behalf of the *dastarkhwan* participants who make vows in seeking assistance to solve their problems. This gendered labor is an act of devotion that deepens the relationship a woman has with the Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait for whom she is hosting the *dastarkhwan* (for a detailed description of the *dastarkhwan* see D'Souza 2014, 186–195).

Bringing God and the Imams Close: Women's Prayer Rituals

Petitioning God, the Imams, and the Ahl-e Bait is performed in cycles of prayer to seek intercession in times of need or crisis. These prayers and acts of pious supplication are above and beyond the regular daily prayers (*namaz*), and might include votive prayers recited through the night, making charitable donations, or giving food to the poor. People perform these supplicatory acts for many reasons. Sometimes the requests are personal, such as to find a husband or wife, or to conceive a child. Many supplications are requests made on behalf of family members, such as for a child to succeed on a test or recover from an illness, or for a husband to secure a well-paying job. There is always a reason and occasion to pray for the well-being of a loved one.

Supplicants use different prayer methods, all of which are characterized by their repetition. Reciting short phrases such as the first part of the *kalimah*, "there is no god but God" (*la ilaha illaʾllah*), attesting to God's uniqueness, or chanting one or more of God's 99 most beautiful names (*al-asma al-husna*), is intended to call the devotee into remembering God. This meditative prayer practice is known as *zikr* ("remembering"), which, through its repetitive recitation, stills the mind and heart so that both come to focus exclusively on God.

Another meditative practice involves the recitation of cycles of prayer that are counted off using prayer beads (*subha*). A special prayer associated with Fatimah al-Zahra that is especially popular with women in South Asia is known as the *tasbih-e Fatimah*, with its cycles of praises and prayers that comprise a full series. To keep track of the prayers, a set of beads (*tasbih*) are required to count off each round that is completed. For this reason, Shiʿa connect the use of prayer beads to an incident from Fatimah's life. In the hagiographical account that follows, we see a tension between the endless domestic labor and poverty that Fatimah endured – and that many South Asian Shiʿi women experience in their daily lives – countered by the rewards her piety and absolute faith in God and her father the Prophet Muhammad will bestow upon her in heaven. Fatimah's struggle – and her ultimate compensation – is detailed in al-Tabarsi's twelfth-century hagiography of the Fourteen Infallibles (*chardah maʿsumin*). This story was later retold in ʿAllama Muhammad Baqir Majlisi's *Bihar al-anwar* (Oceans of lights), a monumental seventeenth-century collection of reports (*akhbar*) narrating traditions of the Imams, the Prophet Muhammad, and Fatimah, and it is found on countless Shiʿi websites.

After Fatimah and ʿAli's wedding, they lived in great poverty. ʿAli toiled as a drawer and carrier of water from the well; Fatimah ground corn on a grinding-stone (*chakki*). One day, Fatimah said, "I have worked so much, I have blisters all over my hands," to which ʿAli replied, "I have carried so much water that it has given me pains in my chest!"

ʿAli suggested to his wife that she visit her father. He mentioned that there were some war captives who had been made servants, perhaps Fatimah's father could give one to them. Nervously, Fatimah went to Muhammad's house to ask for his help. Muhammad asked his daughter, "What brings you here?" Unable to ask her father what she intended, she replied, "I come to bring you greetings of peace." She returned home to her husband who was waiting to know what happened.

Fatimah told ʿAli, "I was ashamed to ask him." Unhappy with Fatimah's response, they both returned to Muhammad's house to request a servant to lighten their domestic burden. The Prophet heard their request, which he denied, explaining there are other Muslims who suffer greater need than Fatimah and ʿAli. Disappointed, ʿAli and Fatimah returned home. Later that night, they heard a knock at their door; it was the Prophet Muhammad, and the couple stood up to offer him welcome. The Prophet said to them, "Stay where you are," for he had come to see ʿAli and Fatimah and explain the reasons for refusing his beloved daughter's request to lighten her burden. Muhammad said, "Shall I tell you about something even better than that which you requested of me?" They indicated they would very much like to hear. Muhammad told how one day the Angel Gabriel [the Angel that was the agent of qurʾanic revelation to the Prophet] came to him and taught him to say, *subhan Allah* (glory be to God) ten times, *al-hamdu lʾillah* (praise be to God), ten times, and *Allahu akbar* (God is greatest), also ten times after each prayer. The Angel Gabriel also instructed Muhammad to recite this circuit of prayer thirty-three times each night before bed, for which God will protect and take care of him.

Summarized version of narrative from Karen G. Ruffle, “May Fatimah Gather Our Tears: The Mystical and Intercessory Powers of Fatimah al-Zahra in Indo-Persian, Shiʿi Devotional Literature and Performance,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3 (2010): 389-390; and Karen G. Ruffle, “May You Learn from Their Model: The Exemplary Father-Daughter Relationship of Mohammad and Fatima in South Asian Shiʿism,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 4, no. 1 (2011): 24.

ʿAli and Fatimah faithfully performed this cycle of praiseful prayer to God as instructed by the Angel Gabriel and then the Prophet Muhammad. This prayer came to be known as the *tasbih-e Fatimah*. Fatimah and ʿAli’s poverty, their sacrifice for others in the community, and their prayers of praise for God find echo in South Asian Sufi poetry and in Telugu-language narratives and poems recited by Sunnis and Hindus in rural Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Fatimah’s loyalty and sacrifice to her family is richly imagined in Telugu poems in which we hear her compare herself to the long-suffering Sita, wife of King Rama of the *Ramayana*:

When ʿAli passed away

I suffered just like Sita in the forest.

I suffered it all to feed you.

I worked in the fields day and night.

I went to the forest to fetch firewood.

I worked so hard for our food every day.

(Mohammad 2011, 184)

This short poem transforms Fatimah into a pastoral figure, working in the fields rather than toiling at her grinding-stone. Whether we are reading a Shiʿi hagiographical text informed by al-Tabarsi or Majlisi’s account of Fatimah at her grinding-stone, or a Telugu poem sung by Sunni and Hindu devotees, the lesson is the same: Fatimah’s focus on the needs of her family and her faith in God are

of utmost importance to her, and she stands as a model of female piety for all women.

Fatimah at her grinding stone and her story of poverty was a rich thematic source for Sufi poets in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Deccan who wrote short poems called *chakki-namahs* (grinding-stone songs) infused with spiritual themes to be sung by women as they went about their daily work. A woman's labor at the *chakki* is a form of meditative practice – prayer even – that is reinforced in the grinding-stone songs. In the songs lay three processual themes that trace a woman's spiritual progression as she works at the grinding stone. The poem first establishes an interweaving relationship between God, Muhammad, the spiritual master (*pir* or *shaikh*), and the woman singing the song. Next, the grinding stone is metaphorically engaged to describe the spiritual relationship between God, the Prophet, spiritual master, and singer. Finally, the singing of the *chakki-namah* is a form of *zikr*, spiritual meditative practice, that shapes a woman's religious self even while performing ostensibly mundane domestic work (Eaton 1974, 122). We see the emphasis on the movement from exterior (*zahir*) practice to an interiorized (*batin*) spirituality and its connection to *zikr* – the meditative praise of God – in a *charkha-namah* (spinning wheel song), another type of Deccani Sufi song sung by women while spinning cotton:

As you take the cotton, you should do *zikr-i jali* [vocal zikr]

As you separate the cotton, you should do *zikr-i qalbi* [zikr of the heart],

And as you spool the thread you should do *zikr-i ʿaini* [zikr of the essence].

Zikr shou ld be uttered from the stomach through the chest,

And threaded through the throat.

The threads of breath should be counted one by one, oh sister.

Up to twenty-four thousand.

Do this day and night,

And offer this to your *pir* as a gift.

(Eaton 1974, 124)

The Prayer of Divine Assistance: Performing ʿ*Amal*

The first time I visited the women-only ʿashurkhanah, Yadgar-e Husaini, in the Purani Haveli neighborhood of Hyderabad's Old City, I noticed a small group of women seated in a row doing a prayer while working beads (*tasbih*) in their hands. I did not know at the time that they were performing ʿ*amal*, a cycle of supplicatory and intercessory prayers that is based on the belief that if a group of people "desire something greatly [they] will ask for it with repeated prayerful determination and that God will reward their faithfulness" (D'Souza 2014, 174). With each round of prayer was counted off on their *tasbih*, the women praying on behalf of someone in need were emulating Fatimah's model of placing absolute faith in God, the Prophet Muhammad, and his family.

Like other supplicatory acts, including the recitation of miracle stories, or the women-only votive meal, the *dastarkhwan*, the ʿ*amal* is a processual ritual that is completed in a number of steps. Before the ʿ*amal* can even begin, all of the women participating in the prayers must be ritually pure. Each woman will perform the required ablutions (*wuzu*) as she would do before prayer. She will also wear clean clothing. As with all rituals of supplication, one must state her intention (*niyyah*) for performing the prayer. The space where the ʿ*amal* is being performed must also be clean, the floor swept, and a clean sheet or carpet laid down upon which the women can sit. It is essential that the woman sponsoring the ʿ*amal* states her intention for why the ritual is being performed. The women performing the prayers also make their intention known to God before they begin the round of prayer. The ʿ*amal* opens with invocatory salutations (*salawat*) and the recitation of Shiʿi *hadith*, prayers, or passages from sacred texts that are significant to the woman sponsoring the ritual. The women may now perform a set number of sequences (*rakʿat*) of prayer before performing individual, silent *zikr*. The women performing the ʿ*amal* receive a small gift (*hidayat*) from the sponsor for their spiritual labor, which may be some rupees or other token. Although many women who perform ʿ*amal* are widowed or poor, they consider

this to be work that is charged with spiritual blessing (*barakat*) that is derived from speaking the words of the Qurʾan and through invoking the memory of the Imams through saying their names or reciting supplicatory prayers (*duʿa*) to them.

The sponsor of the ʿamal decides the formula or portion of the Qurʾan that will be recited in this call for assistance. If an invocatory phrase is used, then the sponsor determines the number of times each woman will recite it. She may select for the *zikr* any number of phrases or prayers. Selections from the Qurʾan are a popular choice, including the opening chapter, the *Surat al-Fatihah*, or the hope-inspiring *ayat-e karimah* (Q 21:87), in which the prophet Yunus (Jonah), who was swallowed by a whale, affirmed his faith in and dependence on God, despite what seem like unfavorable odds against his survival: "There is no god but You, Glory to You, I was indeed wrong!" Yunus's repentance was rewarded in the next verse (21:88) when God "delivered him from distress." Such a selection from the Qurʾan aligns with the emphasis on faith in God and the Imams that is a central theme in the miracle stories and is the foundation for the ʿ*amal*.

Imam ʿAli, the remover of difficulties (*mushkil kusha*), is frequently invoked in the *zikr*. When a Shiʿa encounters difficulties or is in trouble, she might call out, *ya ʿAli madad* – ʿAli help me! "*Ya ʿAli madad*" is a powerful and succinct verbal formula for the *zikr* because it directly asks for ʿAli's help in solving and removing the problem of the person sponsoring the prayer ritual. The remover of trouble is also invoked in the *Nad-e ʿAli*, the "Calling ʿAli." The *Nad-e ʿAli* is a prayer for help invoking Imam ʿAli, which finds its origins with the battle of Khaybar (628 CE), which was a protracted battle for the Prophet Muhammad and the Muslims. The Prophet sought ʿAli's help in conquering a heavily protected fort named al-Qamus. ʿAli attacked the fort with ferocity, and in the course of fighting, lost his shield. He broke down a massive door, which he used as a shield and threw down to make a bridge for his soldiers to gain entry, and ultimately win the battle. In the aftermath of the battle, when the door was replaced on its hinges, it took eight men to lift it, yet ʿAli was so strong he slung it to the ground singlehandedly. ʿAli's heroics at the battle of Khaybar when the Prophet's army

was suffering from insufficient numbers and resources for protracted battle show that when Muhammad requested ʿAli's assistance in his dreams, God answered him. Imam ʿAli embodies the quality of *futuwwah* (generosity and chivalry), which is reflected in the spirit of the *Nad-e, ʿAli* as well as in the epithet the Prophet Muhammad bestowed on him, Asadallah, "the lion of God." As the paradigmatic helper and protector of the weak, one simply needs to call out "*ya ʿAli madad*!" (O, ʿAli, help!), or recite the *Nad-e ʿAli* to receive his miraculous intervention:

Nad-e ʿAli! Nad-e ʿAli	Call ʿAli! Call ʿAli!
Nad-e ʿAliyyan	Call ʿAli,
Mazhar al-ʿajaʾib	The manifesting of wonders
Tajidahu ʿaunan laka fi al-nawaʾib	He will be your helper in trouble
Kullu hammin wa ghammin sayanjali	Every anxiety and grief will end
Ba ʿazmatika ya Allah	By your greatness, O, God!
Ba nabuwwatika ya Muhammad	By your prophecy, O, Muhammad!
Ba wilayatika ya ʿAli	By your dominion, O, ʿAli!
Ya ʿAli! Ya ʿAli! Ya ʿAli!	ʿAli! ʿAli! ʿAli!

ʿ*Amal*, *dastarkhwan*, and the recitation of *muʿjizat kahanis* such as "The Woodcutter's Tale" told on 22 Rajab enable women to affirm their worldly and spiritual relationships on a regular basis.[4] These rituals provide a needed outlet for seeking assistance from God, the Imams and Ahl-e Bait in times of stress, while also being able to commiserate with other women who can empathetically share in their burdens through the telling of miracle stories, eating food together, and praying.

Pilgrimage to Husain: India – Karbala – India

For much of the past 600 years that sizable Shiʿi populations have lived in the subcontinent (certainly there were pockets of Shiʿa settled in the region long before), pilgrimage to the major tomb-shrines of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait in

Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Hijaz were impossible dreams for most due to distance, the prohibitive cost and dangers of travel, and political rivalries. In the past 60 years or so, with the rise of air and bus travel, more South Asian Shiʿa are able to undertake a *ziyarah* tour with a professional company that may be as short as one week, going to Karbala and Najaf, or may last more than one month, taking the pilgrim (*zaʾir*) to all of the important Shiʿi tomb-shrines in the Middle East, as well as those of many of the qurʾanic prophets.

South Asian Shiʿa did not let the difficulty of performing *ziyarah* to Imam Husain's tomb in Karbala, as well as to the other shrine-tombs of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait (*ʿatabat-e ʿaliyat*) prevent them from bringing Karbala to India. In Chapter 4, I discussed the apocryphal story of the Emperor Timur (d. 1405) bringing the first *taʿziya* to India as a physical representation to help him remember and make present Imam Husain's Karbala tomb in that distant land.

The architectural form of the *taʿziya* is transformed into Imam Husain's body and is taken out in procession on 10 Muharram, *ʿashura*, for devotees to receive its *barakat* through the act of auspicious gazing, which allows for a form of virtual pilgrimage. *Taʿziya* processions and their associated rituals of devotion closely parallel those of Hindu gods and goddesses, particularly Durga, Jagannath, and Ganesh, who are venerated in multi-day festivals that involve ephemeral architecture, culminating with the procession of deities that are immersed in an act of ritual "cooling" (*thanda karna*) in a river, lake, or other body of water (*visarjan*). *Taʿziya* processions participate in a broader Indian Muslim traditions, including visitation to Sufi shrines (*dargah*) that integrate Indic patterns of worship involving processions, offerings-vows, and visual exchange (*darśan*).

How then, does Karbala spatially translocate itself to India? The difficulty of making the pilgrimage to Karbala, even for most élite Indian Shiʿa, necessitated other methods for "bringing" Karbala to India (discussed in Chapter 3). At the end of the sixteenth century, Mir Muhammad Muʾmin Astarabadi, a Shiʿi immigrant from Iran who rose through the political ranks at the Golconda-Hyderabad court to become the *peshwa* (prime minister) under Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (r. 1580–1612), established a cemetery, filling it

with soil from Karbala. Named the Daʾira Mir Muʾmin, he distributed the sanctified soil from the precincts of Imam Husain's tomb in Iraq on the cemetery grounds, and in doing so, transformed this space into "Karbala." No longer did an Indian Shiʿa need to have his body transported in a burial caravan across more than 2000 miles for burial in one of Karbala's many cemeteries for the promise of the reward of Paradise (*jannat*, *firdaws*).

In Lucknow, the *Karbala* Talkatora has long served as a graveyard for élite Shiʿa. Most important for everyday Shiʿa are the countless *karbalas* that can be found in any town, city, or village where *taʿziya* are taken in procession and buried. Its consecrated ground is analogous to the Hindu concept of a *tirtha* – a place of "crossing over." As an Indo-Shiʿi "*tirtha*," *karbala* grounds are pilgrimage sites where the universal Shiʿi history of Imam Husain's martyrdom at Karbala is localized in the form of micro-sites around which collective memory and devotion coalesce. These are *lieux de mémoire*, where "memory installs remembrance within the sacred" (Nora 1989, 9).

Nowadays, many South Asian Shiʿa go online and book *ziyarah* tours to Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia through the many pilgrimage companies based in India and Pakistan that advertise online. Of course, one can go on pilgrimage without availing the services of one of these *ziyarah* companies, however, considerable work is involved in securing visas, hotels, and local travel, which can be difficult if you do not speak or read Arabic. *Ziyarah* companies take care of all of these details for the pilgrim (see Figure 6.01).

The price for most packages ranges from US$750 to $2500, depending on the length of the pilgrimage, number of countries included, and whether the pilgrim is completing the trip entirely by bus, airplane, or a combination of the two. Most websites indicate that the price listed on their websites is based on four or five people sharing a room; it will cost more if you want double accommodation. When I was in Damascus, Syria in 2004 doing research on the Sayyidah Zainab and Hazrat Ruqayyah (more commonly known as Sakinah in South Asia) shrines, I was initially surprised by the significant numbers of South Asian pilgrims at the city's Shiʿi sacred sites, although I should not have been. Damascus abounds with

the tombs and memorials of the Ahl-e Bait and Shiʿi saints. The ʿUmayyad mosque holds the Maqam Raʾs al-Husain, the place where Imam Husain's head is purportedly enshrined (another is in Cairo), along with the head of John the Baptist. I spent many hours sitting in the courtyard at the Sayyidah Zainab shrine observing the ritual activities of pilgrims, and I noticed that often, small groups of South Asian men would gather and perform *matam* to show their love for Zainab, as well as express their grief for her suffering.



Figure 6.01 *Ziyarah* tour poster, Karachi.

Photo by Mohammad Nabeel Jafri, 2019.

These websites offer compelling incentives to prospective pilgrims (*zaʾiran*) to undertake pilgrimage to the major Shiʿi shrine-tombs in the Middle East. Galleries of photos on these sites showing South Asian pilgrims in the presence of the shrine-tombs of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, or of ʿ*ashura* and *arbaʿin* at Karbala and Najaf, instill a deep desire in Shiʿa to experience these places for themselves. The website for al-Mehdi Tours adds further encouragement, declaring: “It is said that *Ziyarat* of Imam Hussain on the day of *Arbaeen* is the

sign of a true *momin* [believer] and its *sawaab* [spiritual reward] is equal to 70 Hajj!!" (al-Mehdi Tours n.d.).

Before Joy, a Taste of Sorrow: Celebratory Events

My first book, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shiʿism*, focused on the battlefield wedding of Imam Husain's teenage nephew Qasem to his daughter Fatimah Kubra, who according to popular tradition was made a widow just after the rituals of the marriage ceremony were completed. Reading Urdu and Persian texts and participating in mourning assemblies and Shiʿi wedding rituals in Hyderabad, my previous research examined the relationship between hagiographical text and religious performance in the production of culturally meaningful idealized gender roles that are mediated by the legitimating model of such figures as the bride-widow Fatimah Kubra and her bridegroom-warrior Qasem. In the *majlis* mourning assembly of 7 Muharram and in poetry recited before the joy-filled henna ceremonies (*mehndi*) I attended, which are one of many rituals that takes place before South Asian weddings, a recurrent theme emerged. The *zakirah's* discourse and the poems I heard recited spoke of the extreme situation in which Fatimah Kubra's marriage ceremony (*nikah*) took place on the Karbala battlefield, yet all of the wedding rituals required of a pious and socially upright family were observed. The tragedy lies not in the fact that Fatimah Kubra and Qasem's wedding took place in such distressing conditions, but rather that the bridegroom was martyred so soon after their marriage ceremony and before they had consummated their union. Barely entering adolescence herself, Fatimah Kubra was widowed on the battlefield, which in South Asia transforms her from an auspicious wife (*suhagan*) to an unlucky woman bereft of a husband (*beva*). In the hagiographic imagination, Fatimah Kubra takes on the status and role of the South Asian widow, performing its bodily transformations (breaking bangles, wearing white, removing her nose pin).

Every wedding-related ritual event in Shiʿi South Asia begins with a brief mourning assembly in which Fatimah Kubra and Qasem's wedding is

remembered and mourned through the recitation of *marsiyah* and *nauhah* poems. I asked my friend Riaz, whose son ʿAbbas was getting married, why there was mourning if this was supposed to be a joyful occasion. She explained that before there can be joy, it is the religious obligation for all Shiʿa to remember the suffering and sacrifice of Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait at Karbala. This is another way of maintaining Karbala in the Shiʿi cultural memory and of always feeling loving gratitude for the sacrifice Imam Husain and his family made to preserve Muhammad's prophetic message. Before there is joy, there must be a taste of sorrow.

While it may seem that South Asian Shiʿism is only about mourning, celebrations (*jashn*) of the Imams birthdays and other religiously significant events also shape everyday religious life. South Asian Shiʿa celebrate the day when the Prophet Muhammad appointed ʿAli as his successor in an event that is known as ʿId-e Ghadir, which takes place on 18 Dhuʾl Hijjah. This event is celebrated by stringing lights, feasting on special foods, and attending celebratory *majlis* at the local *imambara* or ʿ*ashurkhanah* to hear about the Prophet Muhammad's appointment of ʿAli as his successor at the well of Khumm during his Farewell Pilgrimage in 632.

Imam ʿAli's birthday on 13 Rajab is celebrated by Shiʿa throughout South Asia with great enthusiasm. In Hyderabad, all of the buildings lining the streets in the Shiʿi neighborhoods of Dar al-Shifaʾ' and Purani Haveli are festooned with countless strings of multi-colored lights, and people set up carts and stalls selling snacks and religious items to pilgrims and celebrants. This event is known as *jashn-e moulud-e Kaʿba*, referring to ʿAli's birth in the Kaʿba in Mecca in 601. On 1 Rajab, a camel goes through the Old City and a royal drum (*naqqarah*) is beat while the rider calls out, "*mah-e Rajab a gaya*," the month of Rajab has come! (Mohammed 2017). The drumming and calling out heightens the anticipation for this sacred month and ʿAli's birthday, which also brings the *kunde ki niyaz* of Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq on the twenty-second of the month. Over the course of several days during the *jashn-e moulud-e Kaʿba* (see Figure 6.02),

boys and men let off deafening firecrackers, sweets are enjoyed, and thousands of Shiʿa flock to Hyderabad's Old City to hear poetry praising ʿAli (*qasidah*).

From 13 Rajab and for four or five days following, tens of thousands of Shiʿa participate in at least 13 processions beginning in the Old City that culminate at Moula ʿAli, where the right handprint of the Imam is enshrined. In 2018, I photographed a poster pasted on a wall at the Koh-e Qaʾem ʿ*ashurkhanah* in Hyderabad, advertising the Grand Sehra Procession from the Alava-e Bibi in Dabirpura to Moula ʿAli to be taken out with bikes and cars (see Figure 6.03).

Moula ʿAli is located 11 miles from the Old City, atop a massive rocky outcrop. Reaching the top of the hill where the shrine is located is one of endurance and devotion to the Imam, which is increased by the long procession Shiʿa make by foot in the procession from the Old City to Moula ʿAli.



Figure 6.02 *Wiladat-e Moulud-e Kaʿba*, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2013.

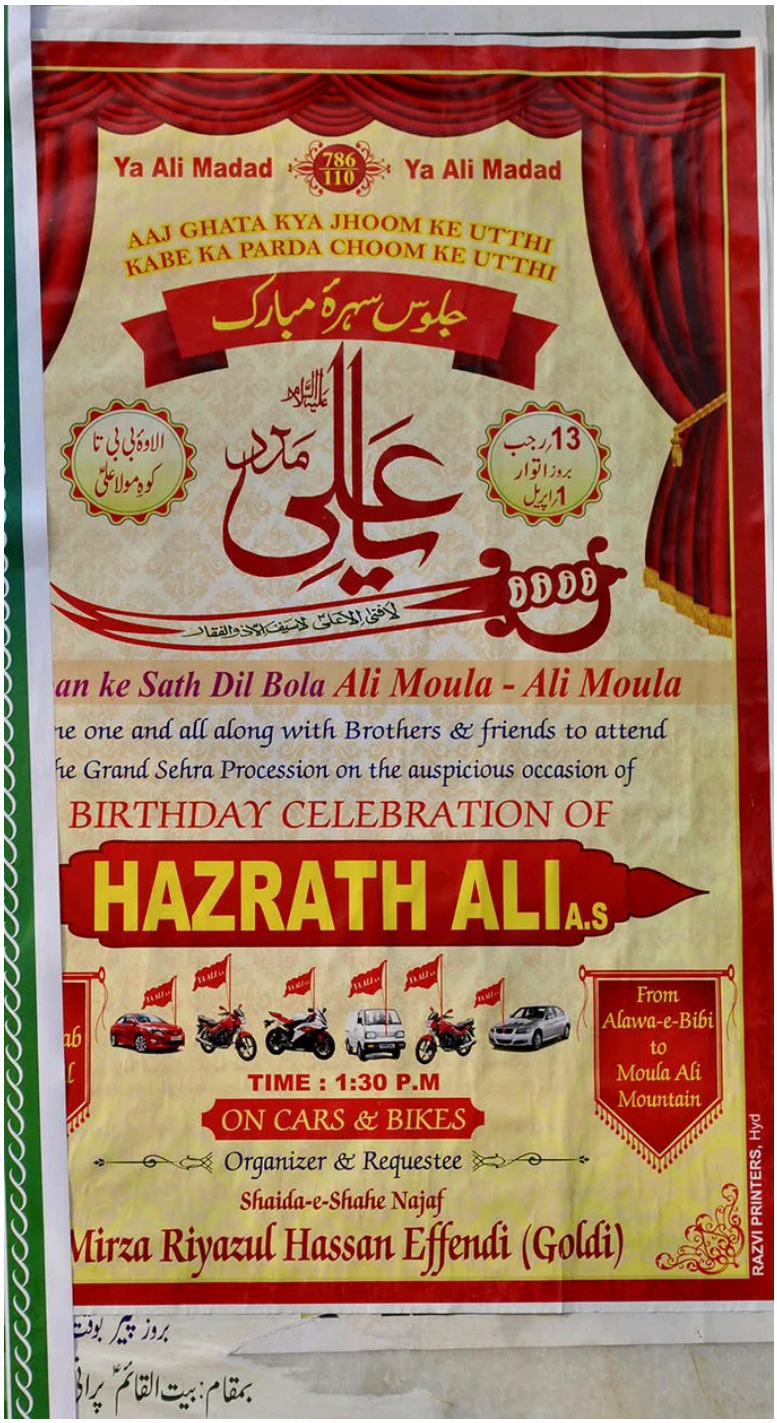


Figure 6.03 Grand Sehra Procession poster, Hyderabad.

Photo by author, 2018.

Conclusion

Supplicatory vows associated with ritual meals and the telling of miracle stories and intercessory prayers ensures that the Imams and Ahl-e Bait are never absent from the lives of South Asian Shiʿa. Food-based *niyaz* rituals invite the presence of an Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait and offer opportunity for Shiʿa to pray and seek intercession in solving problems in their personal lives. Vows and

supplications establish a reciprocal relationship between Shiʿa, the Imams, and Ahl-e Bait. The fulfilment of a petitioner's request requires that she return the Imam's generosity within the community through charitable giving, hosting a *majlis*, donating food to the poor, or performing some other good act. Vow-making rituals and celebrations also use the lived model of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait and the event of Karbala as prisms through which larger religious and theological lessons are conveyed through the accessible media of miracle stories, prayers, and the rituals of celebration.

Jashns are an important part of Shiʿi everyday religion and serve to recognize the sacrifices of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait. Whether it be celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday by sharing sweets and illuminating the neighborhood with green lights, or that of the twelfth Imam by sending him letters deposited in niches in *imambara* walls or a river, or the celebration of weddings and the births of babies, daily life is the joy of sharing these moments with the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, albeit with a taste of sorrow.

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Recommended Readings

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Theoretical Lessons

- Giving is a multi-valent practice that may be reciprocal or one-sided in terms of exchange. Giving, in the form of narrating a miracle story (*muʿjizah kahani*), reciting a prayer, or proffering a prayer, salutation or cloth (*chadar* or *dhatti*) to an *ʿalam* are votive acts, in which one may expect something in return from an Imam or a member of the Ahl-e Bait, or it may be done simply as an act of faith. Intention is an integral component of the giving act, which one must take into consideration when determining the form of exchange occurring.
- South Asian Shiʿi pilgrimage (*ziyarah*) to the major shrine-tombs (*ʿatabat-e ʿaliyat*) in Iran, Iraq, and Syria show a dual process of translocation (Tweed 2011, 24) being effected. First, Shiʿa have made South Asia their home, from which they flow outward to visit Karbala, Najaf, and Damascus. For those unable to undertake pilgrimage physically, Shiʿa have creatively found ways to *translocate* Karbala to South Asia by constructing local *karbala* grounds sacralized with the soil from Husain's shrine-tomb. Theories of translocation and flows are central for understanding the different ways pilgrimage has been creatively accommodated by South Asian Shiʿa.

Notes

1 Shaikh ʿAbbas Qommi begins his calendar of practice with Rajab, indicating the importance accorded to this month in the Shiʿi ritual year.

2 Four months in the Islamic calendar are considered sacred during which fighting is forbidden among Muslims: Rajab, Muharram, Dhuʾl Hijjah, and Safar.

3 A *ser* weighs one and a quarter kilogram.

4 Diane D'Souza's *Partners of Zaynab* (2014) offers the most extensive account of Hyderabadi Shiʿi women's performance of the *dastarkhwan* and ʿ*amal*, and for those interested in a more detailed description, see 169–195.

Afterword

What might everyday Shiʿism look like in South Asia in the coming years and decades? How are rapid technological, social, and political changes, as well as religio-political and ideological transformations shaping Shiʿi communities locally in India and Pakistan and mediating their roles as members of a global transnational Shiʿa network? To what extent will the Shiʿi practices that have been shaped by local South Asian contexts of religion, language, culture, geography, gender, and caste be transformed by labor migration, digital media, and other forces? These questions are difficult to answer, and the pace of change and what it means varies for each community and individual.

The Hyderabadi Shiʿa community has undergone significant change in the 15 years that I have spent studying its history and practices. Many of the senior-most leaders who served as the *zakirs* and *zakirahs* in the *majlis* mourning assemblies are elderly or have passed away; others have moved to the United States, Canada or the Gulf states to live with their children who have migrated for educational

and professional opportunities (Leonard 2007). Many young Shiʿi men and women travel from India and Pakistan to Iran to study in Mashhad and Qom, as famous for their seminaries (*howzah*), as for their shrine-tombs. Here, they receive free tuition and are instilled with a de-vernacularized, cosmopolitan Shiʿism. For some young South Asian Shiʿa, the political theology of post-revolution Iran appeals, particularly as a method of liberation and resistance to minority status and religious persecution in Pakistan and India. For others, the transregional homogenizing interpretation of religious ideology espoused in the Iranian seminaries is in tension with their everyday, Indo-Shiʿi identities that are shaped by the intersection of Shiʿi historical memory with diverse South Asian cultural practices and norms. I was back in Hyderabad for Muharram in 2015 for the first time since 2006, the gap caused by my teaching obligations during the intervening years, and I was surprised to see a large billboard emblazoned with images of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah ʿAli Khameneʾi and his predecessor Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Placed prominently just as one crosses over Salar Jung Bridge leading into the Shiʿi neighborhoods of Dar al-Shifaʾ and Purani Haveli in the Old City, the signboard surprised me and made me think about the ways in which South Asian everyday Shiʿism is constantly evolving.

The impact of the internet and digital media has also indelibly changed the ways in which South Asian Shiʿa communicate their beliefs, disseminating videos of *majlis* and Muharram processions, and instantly publishing new collections of *marsiyah* and *nauhah* poems. Shiʿa living in South Asia, as well as in the diaspora in the United States, Canada and beyond, tune in to YouTube, WhatsApp, and Twitter to watch *majlis* videos and to see Muharram rituals. *Nauhah* composers working with reciters publish digital "albums" of their poems for Muharram, exposing their work to a global Shiʿi audience. The ubiquity of smartphones makes this media portable, unlike the cassette tapes and CDs that used to be the primary way recordings were disseminated, and which had limited the capacity for *nauhah* poets to attain international renown. Lively debates about South Asian Shiʿi cultural and customary practices are debated on websites such as shiachat.com. These conversations are multilingual, with participants

contributing posts in English and Romanized Urdu. I find these chatrooms to be an illuminating means to understand prevailing opinions and attitudes among young Shiʿa on different practices, texts, and beliefs, and I am sensitive to divergent perspectives among people living in South Asia and in diasporic communities. This is an area that deserves further research and will contribute to a growing body of scholarship on cyber-Islam (Bunt 2018; Khan 2015; al-Rawi 2017; Rozehnal 2019), which has largely ignored Shiʿi voices, perspectives and practices.

South Asian Shiʿi practices, whether material, literary, votive, devotional, or architectural are grounded in the everyday, which is a space in which all participate, inclusive of socio-economic and educational status, and whether male or female. Everyday Shiʿism encompasses the practices of ʿAlid devotion that shape the religious worlds of some Hindu and Sufi-inflected Sunni communities. The everyday is the product of historical, social, and cultural processes of negotiation, adaptation, and integration by which Shiʿa have mediated universal Shiʿi norms and theological prescriptions, and the memory of Karbala with their local worlds.

Although I am not Shiʿa, the Ahl-e Bait have made themselves present in my life, and they feel like close, protective companions watching over me. I spent close to seven years between 2003 and 2011 when my first book, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shiʿism* was published, thinking and writing about Qasem and Fatimah Kubra's battlefield wedding. This project was followed up by several years of research about South Asian Shiʿi devotional traditions and literature dedicated to Fatimah al-Zahra. One night, a woman with a bright shining face, wearing a green cloak appeared to me in my dream. Even in my sleep I was extremely overwhelmed because I did not know who this woman was, however, I knew she was beyond this realm. I realized it was Fatimah, and began to cry out in my sleep. Hearing my cries, my husband woke me and I told him that Fatimah had come to me. This dreamtime encounter shook me for days as I pondered the meaning of her appearance. As I was writing this book, Fatimah returned to me again in a dream during the summer of 2019.

This time, I did not feel fear, rather a sense of peace and even protection. Although I end with some reflections on my own experiences of the Ahl-e Bait's presence, the examples and case studies that comprise *Everyday Shiʿism* are fundamentally about emotional practices that connect Shiʿa and ʿAlid devotees to the memory of Karbala and bring the Imams and Ahl-e Bait into the present.

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Teaching Appendix

While I teach at a Canadian university where classes meet once weekly for two hours, the suggestions I make are based on courses that meet twice weekly for 75 minutes. I have written the book to be used in its entirety, or chapters can also be used singly or in clusters for individual classes or a thematic unit in a course.

- For an Islamic civilization survey, the entire book serves as a complement to Shahab Ahmed's 2016 *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*,

particularly in its movement between the pre-modern and contemporary periods and exploration of ways in which the everyday for South Asian Shiʿa constitutes an "explorative, creative, and contradictory" domain to remember the Karbala events and cultivate devotion to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait (Ahmed 2016, 81).

- For one or two classes in an introduction to Islam course, the book can be used to introduce a number of different topics. For a lecture on Shiʿism and the battle of Karbala, Chapter 5 offers a comprehensive introduction. Ritual practice can be addressed through Chapters 5 and 6. I recommend Chapter 6 to address topics relating to lived practices and gender.
- For courses on Hinduism and Islam, often cast as Hindu-Muslim "encounter," the ethnographic case studies and textual examples in Chapters 1 and 2 show how love for Imam Husain has inflected the religious and devotional practices of different Hindu and Sufi-oriented communities in India and Pakistan.
- In courses on religious architecture and Islamic cultures and religion and the arts in South Asian religions, Chapters 3 and 4 will be most directly relevant with their focus on material culture and built space.
- Chapters 2 and 6 will be appropriate for upper-level undergraduate courses on religion and literature.
- I have intentionally integrated gendered religious practices, voices, and experiences into each chapter of the book rather than having a separate chapter on "women." For a unit on women's votive religious practices in an introduction to ritual studies or anthropology of religion course, Chapter 6 will be relevant. Chapter 2's emphasis on feminine voices and emotional expression in Karbala literature will be of interest in upper-level undergraduate and graduate seminars on religious literature and South Asian religious literatures.
- For an undergraduate Islamic mysticism course exploring the mutual influence of Sufism and Shiʿism in the literary imagination, Chapter 2 will

be of interest.

Discussion Questions for the Book Chapters

The questions I offer here are intended to help guide your reading of each chapter. These questions can be used to structure in-class discussions, as test questions, or as platforms for research projects and short essays.

Introduction

- What is everyday Shiʿism? How does the concept of the "everyday" resist the binaries of élite-text and popular-culture?
- How are normativity and the everyday mutually constitutive in South Asian Shiʿism?
- In what ways do the linked categories "Shiʿi/South Asia/everyday" afford new perspectives in the study of Shiʿism?

Chapter 1

- Identify the different concepts South Asians have used to explain their shared participation and contributions to traditions of devotion to Imam Husain, the Ahl-e Bait, and the commemoration of Karbala.
- How did Muharram become Indian? What do the case studies in this chapter tell us about this process?
- How is the South Asian landscape rooted in practices of ʿAlid devotion and how does it shape a cultural memory of Karbala events for Hindu and Sufi-oriented communities?

Chapter 2

- How do feminine voices and emotion shape South Asian Shiʿi literary cultural memories of Karbala? What gendered forms does this cultural memory take and how is it constitutive of the *nauhah*, *marsiyah*, and *muʿjizat kahanis*?

- In what ways are Sufi metaphors and imagery integrated into Karbala devotional literature?
- How is the Karbala of modern Hindi and Urdu fiction transformed from the domain of the miraculous to a powerful revolutionary and moral symbol of justice and humanity? What events shaped these transformations for contemporary Indian and Pakistani Muslim and Hindu writers reflecting on the Karbala theme?

Chapter 3

- What signs, symbols, motifs, inscriptions, and other decorative elements indicate a building's Shiʿi orientation?
- What is the synergistic principle in operation between the Islamic concept of *tashabbuh* (likeness, imitation) and the relationship between South Asian Shiʿi material culture and architectural forms?

Chapter 4

- How do the different forms of South Asian Shiʿi material culture discussed in this chapter work as "image acts"?
- *Taʿziya* and ʿ*alams* operate in material networks that we can describe as an assemblage radiating outward from Karbala, the historic battlefield and pilgrimage center, to the countless *karbala* burial grounds scattered throughout the subcontinent (rivers, grounds, and ponds). How are these assemblages productive of a practice of reciprocal gazing between devotee and object and what is the desired outcome of such interactions?
- How does the use of replicas and images in everyday South Asian Shiʿism shape intra-community discourses constructing the "other"? How have stakeholders on each side of the divide advocated for or against the use of images and objects in articulating their arguments?

Chapter 5

- What themes are recurrent in the *majlis* poems and orations reflecting South Asian Shiʿi cultural memory of Imam Husain's martyrdom at Karbala?
- What are the reasons South Asian Shiʿa perform different forms of self-flagellation during Muharram?

Chapter 6

- How is Fatimah al-Zahra's piety a paradigm for the votive rituals that structure the everyday religious practices of South Asian Shiʿi women? What does Fatimah's piety represent in South Asian cultural memory?
- How have South Asian Shiʿa performed pilgrimage to Karbala when it has been prohibitive to do so because of its cost, geographical distance, and the potential dangers of foreign travel? How have Shiʿa translocated Karbala to the subcontinent and performed pilgrimage locally?

Source Suggestions: Documentary Films and Image Archives

Everyday Shiʿism emphasizes diverse expressions of lived religion in the form of material culture, poetry, and prose centered on Karbala themes, built space, votive rituals, pilgrimage, and a constellation of Muharram rituals, all of which are brought to life in the classroom context through sound and image. An important part of my teaching practice integrates YouTube videos, song, short clips from documentary films, and sometimes even food to make concrete what seems abstract and unfamiliar in the course readings. I also do close "readings" of images with my students in classes to help teach theoretical and technical concepts introduced in the assigned readings. The images that I have included in each chapter have been carefully selected to help generate discussion. I suggest beginning your classroom activities with the images from the book and directing classroom discussion with the questions I offer for each chapter.

Kumar, Ashok, dir. 2004. *The Sorrow and the Joy: Remembering Hussein's Martyrdom in Hyderabad, Pakistan*. DVD. Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center for South Asia.

Focusing on Muharram rituals in Hyderabad, Pakistan among Shiʿa, Sunni, and Hindu ritual practitioners, the documentary emphasizes practices distinct to the Sindhi city and its inhabitants, notably drumming and other musical performances. Attention is also given to the *ʿalam* and *taʿziya* processions of the different communities. *The Sorrow and the Joy* will be of interest to those teaching courses on Hinduism and Islam, South Asian religions, or religion and ritual. The film works especially well with Chapters 1 and 5 of the book.

Kazmi, Nadeem, dir. 2005. *Ten Days*. Sunol, CA: Northern Trek Films.

Shot in a village in Pakistani Panjab, Nadeem Kazmi's documentary relies on ritual practices such as *ʿalam* and *taʿziya* processions, poetic recitations, and the performance of bloody self-flagellation with knives, known as *zanjir ka matam*, to tell his story of Shiʿi love for Imam Husain and his sacrifice at the battle of Karbala. This documentary is particularly effective for integrating into almost any class because of its lack of dialogue, encouraging students to make critical connections between themes in the film and content from Chapter 5.

Katz, Marc J., dir. 2004. *Banaras Muharram and the Coals of Karbala*. DVD. Madison: University of Wisconsin, Center for South Asia.

This documentary focuses on the 7 Muharram possession ritual, in which the spirit of Imam Husain's nephew Qasem, popularly known as "the bridegroom of Karbala," occupies the body of a young man as he runs through the streets of Banaras. The documentary highlights the myriad ways that Hindus and Sunni and Shiʿi Muslims have shaped Muharram ritual in this North Indian city. *Banaras Muharram* will be of interest to those teaching courses on South Asian religions, Hinduism, Islam, and the anthropology of religion. The film pairs well with Chapters 1 and 5.

Bishop, John, and Frank J. Korom, dirs. 1998. *Hosay Trinidad*. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources.

> This documentary explores the rich tradition of *hosay*, the carnivalesque, creolized Muharram ritual observed by East Indians on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. The filmmakers document the history of Trinidadian *hosay*, including Muslim and Hindu neighborhood groups that participate in making the *taʿziya*-style *tajda*, which are taken out in procession during Muharram and show the South Asian roots of the ritual. *Hosay Trinidad* documents in vivid yet attentive fashion the ways in which the Shiʿi roots of *hosay* have been adapted in this diasporic context. This film will be of interest to those teaching courses such as South Asian religions in diasporic contexts, anthropology of religion, introduction to ritual studies, and religion and the arts. Chapters 1 and 4 are particularly relevant for teaching with the film.

Perry, John R., dir. 1996. *ʿAshura at Skardu*. DVD and study guide. Chicago: University of Chicago.

> Since the eighteenth century, the remote Himalayan region of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan's Karakoram has identified as primarily Shiʿa. This documentary shows the Shiʿa of the city of Skardu performing *matam* (self-flagellation) on *ʿashura*, 10 Muharram, as a demonstration of their love and loyalty for Imam Husain and shared memory of the events of Karbala. *ʿAshura at Skardu* will be useful for those teaching courses on religion and violence, peace and violence in Islam, anthropology of South Asian religions, and introduction to Islam. Chapter 5 will be most appropriate to teach in conjunction with this film.

YouTube video recommendations

YouTube is a vast source for exploring everyday Shiʿi practice, both past and present. While most YouTube content is unmediated, it is an invaluable resource for showing religious ritual and performance at the grassroots level, where practice is creative, contestatory, contradictory, and the variables of regional,

linguistic, caste, ethnic, religious, and class differences are brought into relief. It will be important to draw students' attention to continuities and differences in the practices seen in YouTube videos and those discussed in *Everyday Shiʿism*. Attention to difference and divergence is equally as productive for classroom discussion as seeking out similarities in practice. Possible discussions might focus on the activities happening in the video, and why students think this particular ritual has been chosen for filming? What objects do students see and what is being done with them? What emotions are being expressed and are these reflective of certain dimensions of South Asian Shiʿi cultural memory of Imam Husain and Karbala? How is this cultural memory being expressed?

Muharram and Other Ritual Performances[1]

Lahore in 1936 (Muharram procession)

Observance of Moharram in Delhi in 1955

For Muharram processions, YouTube has archival footage from a Muharram procession in 1936 Lahore, just a little more than a decade before the cataclysm of Partition divided much of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan. Another video shows a Muharram procession in Delhi in 1955, less than a decade after the Partition. Searches on YouTube will produce large numbers of videos documenting Muharram processions, mourning assemblies, artisans constructing *taʿziya*, devotional poetry recitations, and clips from Bollywood films with Shiʿi themes.

Marsiyah Shujaʿ Abbas

This is a *marsiyah* recitation by Shujaʿ Abbas, a prominent reciter in contemporary Karachi. The troupe evinces the wide range of ages that compose such groups. This inculcating of children into a performative tradition builds on the mimetic quality of the *majlis* I have discussed elsewhere (Ruffle 2015), and is addressed in Chapter 5. Engagement, in the form of applause as well as tears, indicates the mastery of the orators to induce specific moods in *majlis* participants. Simultaneously, however, such a response also demonstrates the

devotees' integral role in upholding the performance by actively participating through their affective dispositions.

8 Muharram Amroha-style *Matam* Procession in Karachi

This video captures the reciters and the devotees performing *matam* in Karachi. These devotees and performers are re-enacting the *matam* style associated with the city of Amroha, as both a claim to and evidence of their descent from the *sayyids* of Amroha. Beyond the use of the *nauhah* to control the rhythm of the *matam* (Ruffle 2015) as well as the choreography of the *matam*, the video is a great example of how broader questions of belonging and tradition are indexed within an ostensibly simple performance, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 5.

ʿAzakhanah-ye Zahra *nauhah* recitation after *parcham-kushaʾi* (flag-raising), Karachi

On the evening of 1 Muharram, *imambargahs* across Karachi raise black flags on their *ʿalams*. This is accompanied by a recitation of *nauhahs*, an instance of which this video records. Within the video, the interior of the *ʿazakhanah* can be seen. Devotees are, at once, attuned to the unfurling of the material objects and to the sounds and affects around them. A close focus on the reciters demonstrates the 'performativity' of the occasion.

Niyaz-e Imam Jafar Sadiq

This video depicts the *niyaz* at a Sufi shrine in interior Sindh. The video is a great example of the overlap of Sufi and Shiʿi material cultures and votive practices discussed in Chapters 2, 4, and 6, and shows intimate pictures of the various processes of such public *niyaz*. In addition, the voiceover itself is a productive avenue of inquiry insofar it lays claims to a religiosity devoid of class, ethnic, and sectarian elements, before ending with a request for donations.

Soz-khwani Raza Ali Jafri, 12th *Zikr-e*-Imam-e-Zamanah

This video records a festive recitation to anticipate the forthcoming advent of the Mahdi. Raza Ali Jafri is a well-known reciter of *soz*, *marsiyah*, and *nauhah* in Karachi. The joyous nature of the occasion is evident through the sartorial

choices of the reciters, the green background, and the title and the occasion of the performance. The performance context and themes of the *marsiyah* are relevant to Chapters 2 and 6.

22 Rajab *Nazar* Imam Jafar Sadiq

This is a song from the 1977 Islamic devotional film *Niaz aur Namaz*, based on the story of the woodcutter named Riyaz and his devoted wife Razia, on whose devotion the miracle story (*muʿjizah kahani*) of Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq is centered. This film clip will connect to literary themes regarding votive offerings and miracle stories found in Chapters 2 and 6.

"Man Kuntu Mawla," *Qawwali* performed by Abida Parveen

This is a 1994 performance of "Man Kuntu Mawla," Amir Khusraw Dehlavi's (d. 1325) *manqabat-qawwali* of praise for Imam ʿAli based on the *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad, who gathered together his followers during his Farewell Pilgrimage in 632 at Ghadir Khumm and declared, "Whomever accepts me as master (*mawla*), accepts ʿAli also as master." In this video, Parveen sings this *qawwali* for a command performance before the Aga Khan IV, Prince Shah Karim al-Husayni, which is relevant to themes discussed in the Introduction.

Material Culture

Many of the great museums in North America, Europe, and South Asia have digitized and made large portions of their collections accessible to the general public to view on their websites. These museum collections are a powerful resource for both teaching and research that I encourage you to integrate into the classes you teach with *Everyday Shiʿism in South Asia*. Let the images in the book be a starting point for classroom discussions. In-class activities, lectures, and student projects may draw on the images in these museum collections, many of which are inaccessible by geographical distance from our university classrooms, to enrich your analysis of the study of material objects (*ʿalam*, *taʿziya*, Buraq, Zuljanah) and built space (mosques, *imambara*, *ʿashurkhanah*,

bargah, *karbala*). Chapters 3 and 4 from *Everyday Shiʿism* will be a helpful resource to use for object and spatial analysis activities and assignments.

Aga Khan Museum

The Aga Khan Museum has two *ʿalams* in its collection that are of interest, both from the Deccan region of South India. The two *ʿalams* are stylistically different, offering students an opportunity to do a comparative analysis of two standards produced in generally the same time period and region.

British Museum and British Library

This *ʿalam* is particularly rich in Shiʿi symbolism, including two Buraq figures directing their adoring gaze toward what some speculate to be the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, where the Prophet Muhammad ascended to the seven heavens on his Night Journey (*miʿraj*). More likely, this is Imam Husain's tomb, which is inscribed with the names of ʿAli and Husain.

http://explore.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/dlSearch.do?query=any,contains,muharram&vid=BLVU1&institution=BL&search_scope=LSCOP-WEBSITE&tab=website_tab

A keyword search for "Muharram" in the Online Gallery of the British Library returns more than 50 photographs and paintings from the British colonial period spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These images are useful for showing photographic documentation of Muharram rituals practiced in smaller urban areas in the subcontinent, as well as how Shiʿi religious practice figured in the British colonial imagination, which I discuss at the beginning of Chapter 5.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

The LACMA has an extensive collection of South Asian art, including two *ʿalams*, mostly likely from the Deccan. A productive comparative exercise for these *ʿalams* would focus on the *sharja* (the fixed metal tubes that flare out from the sides ending with animals and sometimes Imam ʿAli's double-tongued sword, Zulfiqar).

Metropolitan Museum of Art

Like many other museums, the Met has in its collection several early Deccani *ʿalams*. Distinctive in this collection is that some of the *ʿalams* are much simpler in style, which will afford students the opportunity to reflect on how *ʿalams* need not display all six stylistic-symbolic elements to convey religious meaning.

National Museum-New Delhi

www.nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/

Recommended search engine: The National Museum has several representative images of Buraq dating from the seventeenth century until the contemporary period, as well as *ʿalams* and other devotional objects. I recommend searching for objects through Google's arts and culture search engine, which is easier to navigate than the National Museum's website.

Tasveer Ghar: A Digital Archive of South Asian Popular Visual Culture

www.tasveergharindia.net/

A highly accessible resource for studying more ephemeral aspects of everyday Shiʿism in South Asia. The website has richly illustrated, brief essays on such topics as "Lions of Islam: Symbols of Masculine Power in the Devotional Art of India and Pakistan," which has an informative section about Imam ʿAli as the "lion of God" and the veneration of Husain. "Outside the Imambara: The Circulation of Devotional Images in Greater Lucknow," brings together diverse religious objects, devotional poems invoking Karbala themes, and processional practices to show how the Shiʿa of Lucknow produce cultural memories that are materially mediated.

Note

1 With the exception of the archival Muharram footage, the clip of the song from the 1977 film *Niaz aur Namaz* and Abida Parveen singing the *qawwali*, "Man Kunto Mawla," I am grateful to Nabeel Jafri for compiling this rich collection of YouTube video sources.

Glossary

ʿAdalah:

Divine justice.

Ahl-e Bait:

"The People of the Prophet's House"; the members of the Prophet Muhammad's family descended through his daughter Fatimah al-Zahra.

***ʿAlam*:**

Metal standards or crests representing the twelve Imams and members of the Ahl-e Bait.

***ʿAmal*:**

A cycle of supplicatory and intercessory prayers.

***ʿAshiq*:**

"Lover"; a devotee of God.

***ʿAshura*:**

The tenth of Muharram when Imam Husain was martyred at the battle of Karbala. On this day, South Asian Shiʿa take out *ʿalams* and *taʿziya* in procession, and men publicly perform different types of self-flagellation (*matam*), including with knives and flails.

***ʿAshurkhanah*:**

"House of the tenth"; a type of building in the Deccan region of South India where mourning assemblies are held to remember the events of Karbala and *ʿalams* are displayed.

***ʿAtabat-e ʿAliyat*:**

"Exalted threshold"; the principal shrine-tombs of the Imams and members of the Ahl-e Bait in Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

***Ayyam-e ʿaza*:**

"The days of mourning"; the two months eight days of mourning from the first of Muharram until the eighth day of the third Muslim month, Rabiʿ al-

Awwal, when Shiʿa attend *majlis-e ʿaza* to commemorate the events of Karbala and its aftermath.

***Azan*:**

The call to prayer.

***Barakat*:**

The spiritual power that emanates from a saint's grave or tomb.

***Barat*:**

The bridegroom's horseback wedding procession that takes him to his bride's house.

***Bayʿah*:**

The act of making an oath of allegiance or loyalty that is formalized by shaking or extending one's hand.

***Bhakta*:**

Devotee of a god, goddess, or saint in an individualized practice of worship.

***Bhakti*:**

Devotion or personal service to a god or saintly person.

***Bori*:**

The tube into which the *ʿalam* pole (*naʾizah*) is inserted. The *bori* represents the "neck" of the *ʿalam.*

Buraq:

The mythical steed ridden by the Prophet Muhammad on the night journey (*miʿraj*) from Jerusalem through the seven heavens. The Buraq has the body of a donkey, a woman's head, wings, and a peacock tail.

***Chadar*:**

Cloths given by devotees to cover saints' tombs. *Chadars* are given by devotees while visiting the tomb, especially on the saint's death anniversary (*ʿurs*).

***Chakki*:**

Grinding stone.

***Chakki-namah*:**

Poems and songs with Sufi themes used to teach religious messages that are sung by women in the Deccan region of South India while working at their grinding stones (*chakki*).

Chardah

The "Fourteen Infallibles," namely the Prophet *maʿsumin:* Muhammad, Fatimah al-Zahra, and the twelve Imams.

***Chatr*:**

Parasol; an Indo-Persian symbol of royalty.

***Darbar*:**

The court of a king.

***Dargah*:**

The shrine-tomb of a saint.

***Darśan*:**

The act of reciprocal gazing between a devotee and a god, goddess, or other figure or object of devotion, such as an *ʿalam* or *taʿziya*. In South Asian Shiʿi ritual, *darśan* is analogous to *nazr* or *didar*.

Dastarkhwan-e

A female-only votive meal organized in the *nazri:* name of an Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait. Women host votive meals to petition an Imam or saint, or in fulfillment of a vow.

***Dharma*:**

One's social and religious duty or responsibility according to one's caste and life stage.

***Dhatti*:**

Brocaded cloth presented to an *ʿalam.*

***Didar*:**

The act of reciprocal gazing between a devotee and an image-object of devotion, such as an *ʿalam* or *taʿziya* (see also *nazr*). This act of reciprocal gazing is analogous to the Indic practice of *darśan*.

***Duʿa*:**

Supplicatory prayers.

***Dulha*:**

Bridegroom.

***Dulhan*:**

Bride.

***Dvandva*:**

A compound pairing of terms or figures that form a conceptual unit and do not exist individually. A famous example is the cry, “Hasan! Husain!” or “Asan! Usan!” that was heard by British colonial soldiers in South India, which they misheard as “Hobson-Jobson,” and which later became the title of an important dictionary of Anglo-Indian terms compiled and published in 1886 by Colonel Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell.

***Faqiri*:**

Temporary asceticism performed during Muharram.

***Fatihah*:**

The first chapter (*surah*) of the Qurʾan.

***Gham*:**

Grief, sadness.

***Ghaybah*:**

Refers to the Shiʿi doctrine of concealment in which the twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, is withdrawn and unable to be seen by ordinary people.

***Giryan*:**

Crying, weeping.

***Hajalah-gah*:**

A marriage canopy symbolizing the wedding of the second Imam Hasan’s son Qasem to Imam Husain’s daughter Fatimah Kubra on the Karbala battlefield.

***Hatheli*:**

The “heart” of an ʿ*alam*, where the most intricate calligraphic cutwork is placed. An ʿ*alam* designer may place the names of the “Fourteen Infallibles”

(the twelve Imams, the Prophet Muhammad and Fatimah al-Zahra), the *Nad-e ʿAli*, or other especially powerful names or prayers in this part of the *ʿalam*.

***Hath ka matam*:**

Self-flagellation performed with the hands, usually striking the chest, legs, or head in grief.

Imam:

One of the twelve spiritual and political successors of the Prophet Muhammad whose authority is recognized by the Ithna ʿAshari Shiʿa.

Imamate:

The institution of authority (legal, theological, and political) established by the twelve Imams as the spiritual and political successors of the Prophet Muhammad.

***Imambara*:**

"The house or mansion of the Imam"; buildings where the Karbala martyrs are commemorated and *taʿziyas* and *ʿalams* are installed. *Imambaras* (and the similar *imambargah*, "court of the Imam") are found throughout India, outside of the Deccan region, and in Pakistan.

Indic:

The expression of a basic South Asian identity, ethos, and worldview that is contributed to and shared by Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, and others who have lived in the Indian subcontinent.

***ʿIzzat*:**

Concept of honor related to maintaining the dignity, social rank, and reputation of the family that is intricately connected to women's behavior.

***Jashn*:**

Celebration or joyous occasion, such as ʿId-e Ghadir, or Imam ʿAli's birthday (ʿId-e Moulud-e Kaʿba).

***Jibh*:**

Tongue-like extensions that project upward from the top of an *ʿalam*.

***Julus*:**

Processions, usually on 10 Muharram, when ʿ*alams* and *taʿziyas* are taken out, usually accompanied by Shiʿa performing *matam* and the recitation of *nauhah* poems.

***Kabitt*:**

A four-lined Panjabi-language poem.

***Kafan*:**

Burial shroud.

***Kalimah*:**

The statement of belief required by all Muslims (*shahadah*, "bearing witness"), affirming God's uniqueness and that Muhammad is God's Messenger of revelation (*rasul*). The Shiʿi statement of belief, called the *kalimah* (word), includes an additional clause in South Asia attesting that ʿAli is the friend (*wali*) of God.

***Karamat*:**

A saint's miraculous powers to act as an intercessor between a devotee and God.

***Karbala*:**

A burial ground for *taʿziya*.

***Khaimah-gah*:**

The cluster of tents (*khaimah*) at Karbala where the women and children were encamped that was looted and burned by Yazid's army in the aftermath of the battle.

***Khir*:**

Rice pudding enriched with cardamom, almonds, and pistachios; eaten with *puri* for the *kunde ki niyaz* votive meal for Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq on 22 Rajab.

***Kunde ki niyaz*:**

A votive meal and reading of "The Woodcutter's Tale" organized by women in the name of Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq on 22 Rajab.

***Langar*:**

A chain or anchor that hangs across the threshold of *dargahs*, *ʿashurkhanahs*, and *imambaras*. *Langar* is also the free meal served as religious charity.

***Mahabbah*:**

Love; in the Shiʿi context, for the Imams and Ahl-e Bait.

***Majlis-e ʿaza*:**

Mourning assembly in which the martyrdom and suffering of Imam Husain, his family and supporters is remembered through discourses and poetry.

***Mannat*:**

Supplicatory vow.

***Marsiyah*:**

Narrative poem that extols the heroic qualities of Imam Husain and other Karbala heroes. The *marsiyah* features epic qualities, tending to portray the Karbala protagonists as kingly, larger-than-life heroes.

***Masaʾib*:**

The ritualized narration of the suffering experienced by Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait at Karbala.

***Mashhad*:**

Site of martyrdom; the name for a Shiʿi shrine-tomb.

***Mashk*:**

A curved water pouch made of animal hide with a narrow opening at one end.

***Maʿshuq*:**

The beloved, referring to God in Sufi-Shiʿi thought and aesthetics.

***Matam*:**

Self-flagellation in the form of striking the breast, legs, or head with the hands. Bloody forms of *matam* may be performed using knives, flails, chains, or razor blades.

***Matami guruh*:**

An association of men and boys who perform self-flagellation together during Muharram and at other times in the year. Many *matam* associations devise new flagellation styles to perform each year during Muharram, with different

groups being known for distinctive rhythmic styles or techniques by which they strike their bodies.

***Mehndi*:**

Henna; also refers to the prewedding ceremony that takes place at the bridegroom's house, to which the bride's family sends gifts and trays of henna paste.

***Mihrab*:**

The semi-circular prayer niche, in which the direction orienting people to pray toward Mecca is indicated by the *qiblah*.

***Minbar*:**

A raised seat from which the Friday midday prayer (*jumaʿ*) discourse is delivered by an *imam*, or from which an orator (*zakir*) recounts the suffering of Imam Husain and his companions at the battle of Karbala during the *majlis* mourning assembly.

***Miʿraj*:**

The night ascension of the Prophet Muhammad from Jerusalem through the seven heavens on the back of his mythical steed Buraq.

***Muʾazzin*:**

The person who performs the call to prayer.

***Muʿjizah*:**

Miracle.

***Muʿjizah kahani*:**

Miracle story. These stories are associated with vows made by women and are told in the name of Fatimah al-Zahra, Imam ʿAli, and Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq.

***Mundan*:**

The South Asian ritual of the first tonsure of a child's hair, often in the first or third year of life. *Mundan* is performed by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, and it is considered an auspicious purifying act that will help to ensure long life and protection from the evil eye for the child (*nazr* or *kartut*).

***Naʾizah*:**

The pole on which an ʿ*alam* is raised.

***Naʿl sahib*:**

"Lord horseshoe"; a famous ʿ*alam* in Hyderabad that contains a piece of Zuljanah's horseshoe. Over time in the Deccan, the *naʿl sahib* ʿ*alam* has gradually come to signify Qasem rather than Imam Husain, particularly in villages in towns with primarily Hindu and Sunni populations.

***Namaz*:**

Ritual prayer, typically performed three times daily by Shiʿa.

***Nauhah*:**

Short rhythmic mourning poem in couplet form; has both mourning and non-mourning themes. Mourning *nauhahs* are usually chanted as Shiʿa perform *matam*.

***Nauhah-khwan*:**

A professional reciter of *nauhahs* who may be backed up by a small group of accompanists who chant the poem's refrain.

***Nazr*:**

The act of reciprocal gazing between a devotee and an image-object of devotion, such as an ʿ*alam* or *taʿziya* (see also *didar*). This act of reciprocal gazing is analogous to the Indic practice of *darśan*.

***Niyyah*:**

Intention.

***Niyaz*:**

Prayers and rituals of petition.

***Qiblah*:**

The sign pointing the direction toward Mecca for prayer.

***Pan-bira*:**

A popular digestive in India in which a betel leaf is filled with aromatic ingredients, including spices, areca nuts, and tobacco.

***Panjah*:**

The hand with the fingers extended; an auspicious symbol of protection. As an ʿ*alam* design, the *panjah* may variously represent the *panjetan-e pak*, Imam ʿAli, ʿAbbas, or Imam Husain.

***Panjah-sharif*:**

A handprint of one of the Imams, particularly ʿAli, embedded in stone.

***Panjetan-e Pak*:**

"The Holy Five"; the Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah al-Zahra, ʿAli, Hasan, and Husain.

***Patka*:**

A velvet embroidered banner.

***Peta*:**

The "belly" or girth of an ʿ*alam*, where inscriptions of the names of the Imams or verses from *hadith* or the Qurʾan are found.

***Pir*:**

Sufi spiritual master and teacher.

***Pir-makanam*:**

"*Pir*-house," also known as *pirla devulu gudi*; the place where ʿ*alams* (*pir*) are installed and displayed during *pirla panduga* (Muharram).

***Pirla-Panduga*:**

Telugu: "festival of *pirs*"; the observance of Muharram, largely by non-Shiʿa, in the Telugu, Marathi, and Kannada-speaking villages and towns of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, northern Karnataka, and Maharashtra.

***Piru-swami*:**

"Saint-god"; a blended Muslim-Hindu name given to ʿ*alams* in the practice of *pirla-panduga*. The word *piru-swami* reflects the non-Shiʿi character of *pirla-panduga*, as well as the influence of Sufism, blended with Hindu elements of *bhakti*.

***Purdah*:**

The segregation of men and women.

***Puri*:**

A fried, puffed bread eaten with *khir* for the *niyaz* of Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq on 22 Rajab.

***Qatl-gah*:**

The site where Imam Husain was martyred at Karbala. In South Asia, a *qatl-gah* refers to large, open spaces where mourners gather on 10 Muharram.

***Raga*:**

A melodic mode that provides a framework for performative improvisation in a particular style.

***Rekhti*:**

Poetry composed by male authors using female voice and emotions.

***Ritha*:**

The practice of women extolling the merits and virtues of a deceased male member of a tribe. The *marsiyah* is the formal, poetic eulogization of the *ritha* of a deceased individual, which emerged in pre-Islamic Arabia.

***Sabil*:**

Drinks stalls that are set up during Muharram in memory of the thirst experienced by the Karbala heroes who were denied access to the Euphrates River for three days from 7 Muharram by Yazid's army.

***Sachaq*:**

Prewedding ritual in which the bridegroom's family sends trays (*kishti*) of gifts to the bride and her family.

***Salam*:**

Short poem of mourning written in couplet form with a refrain.

***Salawat*:**

Also known as *durud*. The response call that is given by devotees during a *majlis* in praise and benediction of the Ahl-e Bait, declaring, "O God, bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad."

***Sawab*:**

Religious merit that is acquired through performing good religious deeds such as hosting a *majlis*, vowing to read a miracle story, or giving to charity.

***Ser*:**

A weight equal to one and a quarter kilogram.

***Shabih*:**

Representation or replica; in South Asian Shiʿism, a *shabih* refers to an object or thing that represents and invokes the memory of Imam Husain and the events of Karbala, including *taʿziyas*, *ʿalams*, and Zuljanah.

***Sham-e ghariban*:**

"The night of the exiles," following Imam Husain's martyrdom from the evening of 10 Muharram into the early morning of the eleventh. During this night, the tents of the women's encampment were burned, they were humiliated and taken captive.

***Sharbat*:**

A sweet drink prepared from fruits, flowers, or a mixture of spices, herbs, and other ingredients. *Sharbats* are cooling and refreshing.

***Sharja*:**

Fixed tubes that extend from each side of the *ʿalam* in the shape of animals, particularly dragons, lions, peacocks, or fish. The *sharja* has talismanic and protective powers.

***Soz*:**

"Burning"; a genre of Urdu mourning poetry that is melodically performed.

***Sunar*:**

Goldsmith.

***Tabarruk*:**

Special food that is distributed at the conclusion of the *majlis* mourning assembly in fulfillment of a vow or as a customary practice by a particular family or association.

***Tabut*:**

A replica of Imam Husain's coffin.

***Takhallus*:**

The pen-name or pseudonym of an author.

***Tasbih*:**

Cycles of prayer counted off on prayer beads (*subha*).

***Taʿziya*:**

Replica of Imam Husain's Karbala tomb made from diverse materials, including bamboo, tinsel, paper, flowers, talc, or silver. *Taʿziya* are either permanent or temporary, the latter being buried on 10 Muharram in *karbala* grounds or immersed in water. *Taʿziya* are not exact replicas or Imam Husain's tomb, rather they are representational models that invoke collective memory of his martyrdom at Karbala.

***Taʿziyeh*:**

An indigenous Iranian dramatic performance reenacting the events of Karbala.

***Tughra*:**

A calligraphic drawing combining verses from the Qurʾan, the names of the Imams or Ahl-e Bait, or other auspicious phrases, which, when inscribed in an *ʿalam*, are usually circular or almond-like in shape.

***ʿUdi*:**

The ash from incense that is smeared on the body for the purpose of healing.

***Wali*:**

Lord, saint, master.

***Waqf*:**

A religious endowment for the upkeep of buildings and institutions.

Zakir

(fem. *zakirah*) "One who remembers"; a person who performs *majlis* discourses on Shiʿi religious topics, as well as recounting the suffering (*masaʾib*) experienced by Imam Husain and his family at Karbala.

***Zananah*:**

An Urdu word used to indicate women's space, for example, a segregated space for women to observe and participate in a larger men's mourning

assembly, or a women-only *majlis* or another religious event (e.g., *zanani majlis*).

***Zanjir ka matam*:**

Self-flagellation performed with blades or knives.

***Ziyarah*:**

"Visitation," or pilgrimage to the shrine-tombs of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait in Iraq, Iran, and Syria. *Ziyarah* is also performed to gaze on ʿ*alams* and *taʿziyas* and to seek intercession from Imam Husain and the Ahl-e Bait at ʿ*ashurkhanahs* and *imambaras* in South Asia.

***Ziyarat*:**

A prayer of salutation and benediction performed on ritually important occasions, such as when undertaking pilgrimage to an Imam's shrine-tomb, on ʿ*ashura*, or at the end of a *majlis* mourning assembly. These salutary prayers are made to the twelfth Imam, al-Mahdi, Imam Husain, and other important Shiʿi sacred figures.

Zulfiqar:

The name of Imam ʿAli's bifurcated, two-bladed sword.

Zuljanah:

Imam Husain's white stallion that loyally protected him during the battle of Karbala and delivered the message of his martyrdom to the women in the encampment by rubbing its forehead in the Imam's blood. In many parts of Pakistan and North India, Zuljanah processions are an important part of 10 Muharram rituals.

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