

Article

Āzādārī in India (12th–19th Century): Cultural Fusion, Political Patronage, and the Role of Women in the Commemoration of Karbala

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Abstract:

The Battle of Karbala, fought in 680 A.D., is a pivotal event in Islamic history, symbolising resistance against oppression and the pursuit of justice. Imam Hussain ibn Ali's martyrdom, alongside his seventy-two companions, transcends sectarian divides, offering a universal message of sacrifice and moral courage. Āzādārī, the ritual mourning commemorating the tragedy of Karbala, has become central to Shi'ism religious and cultural practices, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, where it has evolved and integrated into local traditions. This research examines the historical, political, cultural, and social dimensions of Āzādārī, focusing on its development in India and its profound influence on the region's religious identity. The study highlights the syncretic nature of Āzādārī, which blends Islamic, Persian, and Indian cultural elements, and explores the central role of women in sustaining and expanding this tradition. Women's participation in Āzādārī, from leading poetic recitations to organising mourning rituals and public processions, reflects their significant contribution to the preservation and transformation of this practice. By examining the continued relevance of Imam Hussain's sacrifice and the rituals of Āzādārī, this research underscores its ongoing role as a source of spiritual, ethical, and social empowerment, inspiring contemporary movements for justice, human rights, and resistance against tyranny.

Keywords: Hussain, Āzādārī, Karbala, Awadh, Taziya, Muharram, India

1. INTRODUCTION

The commemoration of Karbala, known as *Āzādārī*, has woven itself deeply into the fabric of Indian society since the 12th century. Rooted in the tragic events of the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, which witnessed the martyrdom of Imam Husain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, *Āzādārī* is both a ritual mourning and a vibrant cultural phenomenon. Over several centuries (12th–19th), its contours in India were shaped by a dynamic interplay of migration, state power, and indigenous cultural currents, producing a unique syncretism that sets Indian practices apart from those elsewhere in the Muslim world.

Āzādārī's origins in India can be traced to the late medieval period, coinciding with the establishment and expansion of Muslim dynasties such as the Delhi Sultanate and later the

Mughal Empire. The influx of Persian, Central Asian, and Deccani influences brought with them the Shia practices of ritual mourning, which gradually gained traction, particularly among the aristocracy and urban centers. By the time of the Mughal era, and increasingly under regional dynasties like the Nawabs of Awadh, *Āzādārī* had become an institution supported by courtly patronage. Rulers financed grand *imambaras* (congregational halls), sponsored elaborate processions, and associated their own legitimacy with the commemoration of Karbala. Such political patronage extended the reach of *Āzādārī* throughout the subcontinent, from Lucknow to Hyderabad, creating spaces for elite as well as popular participation.

One of the most remarkable facets of *Āzādārī* in India has been its role as a site of cultural fusion. The rituals

and processions became arenas where Persianate, Middle Eastern elements blended with vibrant Indian traditions. Decorative *taziyas* (replicas of Husain's tomb), crafted from bamboo and paper, reflected indigenous artistry. The recitation of *marsiyas* (elegiac poetry), originally composed in Persian or Arabic, soon found new expression in local languages such as Urdu and Awadhi. Hindu, Sikh, and other non-Muslim communities also participated in various public rituals; in cities like Varanasi and Lucknow, the Muharram processions became important communal events. In some cases, Hindu rulers themselves built *imambaras* or donned mourning attire during these ceremonies, blending Shia commemoration with local customs and spiritual sensibilities. This hybridization and inclusivity highlight the adaptive and integrative potential of *Āzādārī*, situating it at the heart of India's composite culture.

Equally important, yet understudied, is the critical role women have played in sustaining and transforming *Āzādārī* across these centuries. In domestic spaces, women pioneered rituals such as the *majlis* (mourning assemblies), often presiding over gatherings where elegies and narrative retellings of Karbala were recited. Their centrality extended to artistic domains—composing lamentation poetry, adorning *taziyas*, and transmitting oral traditions from generation to generation. While public processions were primarily male-dominated, women's private ceremonies cultivated emotional resilience, social solidarity, and the perpetuation of religious-cultural memory. In several regions, influential female patrons funded public *Āzādārī* events, and the ritual lament (*nauha*) composed and performed by women became an integral part of the commemorative experience. Thus, women traversed both the intimate domains of household ritual and the broader arena of public religious life, nurturing continuity and fostering adaptation.

The period from the 12th to the 19th century marks not just the transplantation but the deep internalisation of *Āzādārī* (آزاداری) into Indian lifeworlds. This process was catalysed by sustained political patronage, cultural exchange, and the creative agency of women, resulting in a living tradition whose legacy persists. The study of *Āzādārī*'s evolution in India thus offers invaluable insights into the ways memory, devotion, and identity are cultivated at the intersection of power and piety, tradition and innovation, and gender and public life. In doing so, it underscores the significance of commemorative practices, not merely as markers of religious identity but as powerful vehicles for cultural synthesis and social transformation.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF KARBALA AND ITS UNIVERSAL LEGACY

The Battle of Karbala, fought on the 10th of Muharram in 680 A.D. (61 AH), is among the most significant events in the history of Islam. A sad struggle with the tyrannical troops of Yazid ibn Muawiya, the Umayyad caliph, resulted in the martyrdom of Imam Hussain ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and his seventy-two companions. This tragic event took place on the desolate plains of Karbala, which is located in what is now the country of Iraq. It is still a potent symbol of resistance against tyranny and oppression because Imam Hussain took a stand against the unjust rule of Yazid, despite the fact that he was aware of the inevitable aftermath of his actions. It is important to note that the martyrdom of Imam Hussain was not just a personal sacrifice but also an act of profound moral and spiritual defiance. By refusing to pledge loyalty to Yazid, who exemplified the misuse of power and the corrupting influence of political ambition, Hussain was able to keep his independence. The rejection of Yazid's leadership by Imam Hussain, in spite of the overwhelming odds against him, conveyed a message that will last forever: the significance of standing up for justice, truth, and righteousness, even in the face of imminent death¹². In light of this, his sacrifice is regarded as the highest possible example of moral integrity. It is an act that goes beyond the boundaries of sectarian divisions and speaks to the universal principles of human dignity, justice, and the struggle against oppression.

Imam Hussain ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and his seventy-two companions were killed here, in the empty plains of Karbala in what is now Iraq. They were fighting against the cruel armies of Yazid ibn Muawiya, the Umayyad caliph. It is still a potent symbol of resistance against tyranny and oppression because Imam Hussain took a stand against the unjust rule of Yazid, despite the fact that he was aware of the inevitable aftermath of his actions. It is important to note that the martyrdom of Imam Hussain was not just a personal sacrifice but also an act of profound moral and spiritual defiance³. By refusing to pledge loyalty to Yazid, who exemplified the misuse of power and the corrupting influence of political ambition, Hussain was able to keep his independence. The rejection of Yazid's leadership by Imam Hussain, in spite of the overwhelming odds against him, conveyed a message that will last forever: the significance of standing up for justice, truth, and righteousness, even in the face of imminent death⁴. In light of this, his sacrifice is regarded as the highest possible example of moral integrity. It is an act that goes beyond the boundaries of sectarian divisions and speaks to the universal principles of human dignity, justice, and the struggle against oppression.

1 Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani, *The Shi'i Islamic Martyrdom Narratives of Imam al-Husayn* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023), 275.

2 Syed Abul Ala Moududi, *The Martyrdom of Imam Hussain* (Jamaica, NY: Islamic Circle of North America, 2023), <https://icna.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/The-Martyrdom-Of-Imam-Hussain.pdf>.

3 *ibid*

4 Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani, "Redefining Some Genre-Specific Words: Evidence from Some English Texts about Ashura," presented at *Cultural and Historical Lexicography session*, University of Qom, Iran, unpublished conference item, deposited in Oxford University Research Archive, February 14, 2011, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:8307ae11-21a4-4a2e-95b0-cb76d59212fb>.

Since then, the tragedy that occurred at Karbala and the stand that Imam Hussain took have become a rallying cry not only for *Shi'ism Muslims* but also for oppressed people and communities all across the world. His message of perseverance in the face of enormous injustice strikes a chord with the difficulties of communities who are marginalised and disenfranchised, regardless of the religious or ethnic heritage of such communities. There have been various movements for justice, human rights, and social equality that have been inspired by Hussain's refusal to bend down to oppression. These movements have drawn similarities to the battles of persecuted populations throughout history. The martyrdom of Imam Hussain is considered to be a manifestation of the highest ideals of selflessness, sacrifice, and the quest of justice within the Islamic community. In a world that is frequently characterised by political corruption, injustice, and suffering, his example serves as a beacon of light, offering the promise that even the most vulnerable and tiniest community can resist and stand up for what is right. The practice of *Āzādārī*, which is not only a memorial of an event but rather a reaffirmation of these principles and a collective statement of solidarity with those who continue to strive for justice and human dignity, is founded on the universal message of Karbala, which serves as the spiritual and moral foundation for the activity⁵. Hence, Muslims, and particularly Shiites, have been recommended not to forget this unique tragic event⁶. In consequence, Ashura has been commemorated ardently by Shiite Muslims as well as non-Muslims⁷.

3. THE RISE AND PATRONAGE OF *ĀZĀDĀRĪ* IN INDIA

A ceremony known as *Āzādārī*, which involves mourning for Imam Hussain and honouring his murder, has deep historical origins in the Indian subcontinent. This is especially evident in its affiliation with Sindh and its connections to the early *Shi'ism* community. Sultan Muizzuddin Muhammad Ghori, whose reign in the late 12th century heralded the development of *Shi'ism* Islam in northern India, was one of the earliest advocates of *Āzādārī* in India. He was also one of the first people to show support for the practice. He created the groundwork for the practice of *Āzādārī* in the region, ensuring its expansion and integration into the cultural fabric of the subcontinent, through his support of the *Shi'ism* faith, which laid the foundation for the practice. The notion that a Sindhi woman was married to Imam Zainul Abideen, the son of Imam Hussain, and that she gave birth to his son Zaid, who was later martyred, is one that is accepted by a large number of people. This familial connection to Sindh is frequently regarded as one of the elements that contributed

to the cultivation of a significant *Shi'ism* presence in the province.⁸ The public observance of mourning during Muharram, known as *Āzādārī*, underwent substantial development throughout the time period of mediaeval India. During the 13th century, the practice was initially carried out in public places such as mosques, public areas, and military barracks. Notable individuals such as Minhaj-i Siraj were responsible for delivering religious speeches during significant times such as Ramadan and Muharram. *Shi'ism* groups achieved some significance under the reigns of kings such as Muhammad bin Tughluq; but, following times, particularly during the reign of Firuz Shah Tughluq, witnessed the state-led persecution of *Shi'isms* from that point onwards. The entrance of leaders such as Saiyid Muhammad Ashraf Simnani and the spread of *Shi'ism* in the Deccan under the Bahmanids both contributed to the expansion of *Shi'ism's* influence, despite the fact that these reverses occurred. A significant contribution to the dissemination and propagation of *Shi'ism* was made by the Bahmanids of Gulbarga and Bidar, as well as by the Adil Shahis of Bijapur and the Nizamshahis of Ahmadnagar. Yusuf Adil Shah, who ruled the Deccan in the years 1502 and 1503, is credited as being the first important Shi'a king. He was the one who issued the first Shi'a azan and included the names of the Twelve Imams in the khutbah. During the ensuing reign of Ali Adil Shah (1558–80), leaders such as Ghiyasuddin Shirazi Afzal Khan established seminaries in Bijapur that attracted students from Iran. This further solidified the position of *Shi'ism* among the Islamic community. This flood of experts, which included Shah Fathullah Shirazi, had a vital role in dramatically strengthening the intellectual and theological impact of *Shi'ism* in the Deccan region. As a result, *Āzādārī* became an essential element in the cultural and religious life of the region.⁹

Under the rule of the Mughals, Iranian influence reached a particularly high level of significance. After the loss of his empire, Emperor Humayun (1530–1536) spent a significant amount of time at the court of Shah Tahmasp of the Safavid Empire. During this time, he played a significant role in the development of ties between the *Shi'ism* and Mughal traditions. The Safavid Empire had designated *Shi'ism* to be the state religion, and during the reign of Shah Tahmasp, many practices that were in opposition to *Shi'ism* principles were abandoned. This created an environment that was conducive to the growth of *Shi'ism* culture. In addition, the Khurasan area of Iran, which has been renowned for its intellectual and cultural activity ever since the Samanid (874–999) and Seljuq (1037–1157) periods, was a significant source of scholarly and artistic influence. Immigrants from

5 Syed Jawad Naqvi, *Azadari (Mourning and Lamentations): A Movement by Lady Zainab (s.a)*, trans. A. V. Rizvi (Karachi: Matab Publications, 2009), 91.

6 Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani, "Devotion and Thirst: The Role of 'Water' in the Permanence of the Battle of Ashura in Muslims' Historical Memory" (paper presented at the conference *The Challenge of Water in the Province of Qom*, University of Qom, June 9, 2010), to be published electronically at www.qomwater.ir.

7 Syed Jawad Naqvi and Kishan Rao, eds., *The Muharram Ceremonies among the Non-Muslims of Andhra Pradesh* (Hyderabad, A.P.: Bab-ul-Ilm Society, 2004).

8 Rezavi, Syed Ali Nadeem, (2006). 'The Shia Muslims', in ed. J.S. Grewal (ed.), *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, Vol. VII, Part II, Oxford University Press, Delhi. pp. 283–284.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 285.

Khurasan, such as poets, intellectuals, and musicians, were held in extremely high esteem at the Mughal court. Their contributions served to enrich the cultural and religious life of the empire. In turn, the Mughal emperors showed their support for these intellectuals, so facilitating the dissemination of knowledge throughout the empire and contributing to the establishment of *Shi'ism* rituals, such as *Āzādārī*, as fundamental religious activities. The Emperor Akbar, who reigned from 1556 to 1605, played a crucial influence in the advancement of *Āzādārī*, particularly through his policies that were inclusive and his willingness to embrace a variety of religious traditions. The court of Akbar evolved into a hub for the exchange of cultural and religious ideas, drawing in intellectuals and mystics of *Shi'ism* who made significant contributions to the propagation and institutionalisation of *Āzādārī* ceremonies. The practices of *Shi'ism*, such as the observance of Muharram, flourished under his rule as a result of his sponsorship.¹⁰

On the other hand, during the reign of Aurangzeb (1658–1707), there was a considerable change in the environment that surrounded *Āzādārī*. In spite of the fact that Aurangzeb was known for his orthodox Sunni ideas, he had less sympathy for the *Shi'ism* community and actively worked to repress their practices. As a consequence of this, the observance of Muharram grew less significant among communities that adhere to *Shi'ism*, and eventually, Muharram processions were prohibited. This particular action, which aimed to restrict the activities of *Āzādārī*, was not exclusive to Aurangzeb; even earlier, Sultan Sikandar Lodi had implemented a prohibition that was comparable to this one.¹¹ Aurangzeb's resistance was founded on religious orthodoxy, since many Sunni scholars believed that public mourning rites, such as processions, were in violation of Islamic norms. This was due to the fact that mourning was traditionally restricted to three days after the death of a person. In addition, there are political scholars who contend that the banning of the processions by Aurangzeb was driven by the necessity of preventing sectarian tensions and violent clashes between populations that adhere to *Shi'ism* and Sunni. There was a surge in ideological and religious divisions throughout this time period, which contributed to the tensions that existed between the two factions.¹² On the contrary, the Nawabs of Awadh (Oudh), particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries, played a significant role in the establishment of *Āzādārī* as an institution. In the period spanning from 1775 to 1797, Nawab Asaf-ud-Dāulah and his successors constructed magnificent Imambaras and staged public processions, so establishing them as prominent cultural and religious events in the region. There was a combination of religious devotion and political pragmatism that drove the Nawabs to provide patronage to their subjects. The Nawabs increased their political legitimacy by associating

themselves with the *Shi'ism* population and cementing their power over Awadh. They did this by providing support to the *Shi'ism* community and by promoting the observance of Muharram. However, *Shi'ism* was practiced by the Nawabs of Bengal from the year 1707 AD till the year 1880 AD. In addition to the Nizāmat-i Imābarah, which was constructed by Nawab Siraj-ud Daula, they constructed a massive Imām-bargāh, which was the largest of its kind on the subcontinent. The patronage of *Āzādārī* was extended to the nawabs of Bengal and Iranian merchants in Bengal. Additionally, the political capital of Murshidabad and the commerce hub were also patronised. Researchers of *Shi'ism* from both inside and outside of India were drawn to Hoogly.¹³

4. ĀZĀDĀRĪ: RITUALS OF MOURNING, DEVOTION, AND MORAL REFLECTION IN SHI'ISM

The tradition of mourning, known as *Āzādārī*, has emerged as an essential component of the religious and cultural life of the *Shi'ism* Muslim community. This annual season of remembering is not only a ritual; rather, it is an extraordinarily emotional outpouring of faith, love, and commitment to the principles that were exemplified by the sacrifice of Imam Hussain. These principles include struggle against oppression, justice, and truth. There are a variety of ceremonies that are included in the practice of *Āzādārī*. These ceremonies are all aimed at commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his companions, as well as at reaffirming the dedication to their values. Majlis, which are gatherings for mourning, are one of the most prominent features of *Āzādārī*. It is during these gatherings that *Marsiya*s, which are elegies, and *Nauha*, which are dirges, are chanted.¹⁴ This mourning recitation stirs deep emotional responses in its audience, mirroring the anguish, suffering, and torment experienced by the martyrs of Karbala at the hands of Yazid's army. The opening stanza of this powerful *nauha* was penned by the renowned Agra-born poet Najm Afandi (1893–1975).

ظلم جو مسافر پر ہو گیا نہ بھولیں گے
اس کی تشنہ کانی کا جرنہ بھولیں گے

ابتداء بھولیں گے، انتہاء بھولیں گے
فاطمہ کے پیارے کامر تبہ نہ بھولیں گے

جو حسین پر گزری وہ جفا نہ بھولیں گے
بھول جائیں گے سب کچھ، کر بلا نہ بھولیں گے

The community is able to reflect on the sacrifices that were made at Karbala with the help of these literary lamentations, which elicit feelings of sorrow. The ritualistic chest-beating known as *Mātam*, which serves as a symbolic gesture of sympathy with the suffering of Imam Hussain and his followers, is a particular physical manifestation of mourning

10 Rezavi, Syed Ali Nadeem, (2017). 'The State, Shia's and Shi'ism in Medieval India', *Studies in People's History*, Vol. 4, No. 1. pp. 34–43.

11 Hameed-ud-Din, (1961). 'Indian Culture in the Late Sultanate Period: A Short Study', *East and West*, Vol. 12, No. 1. p. 33.

12 Trivedi, Madhu, (2010). *The Making of the Awadh Culture*, Primus Books, Delhi. p. 43.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 53–55.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 55–60.

that occurs during the month of Muharram.¹⁵ In addition, the rituals of *Zanjir-Zānī* and *Qāma-Zānī*, which entail the act of self-flagellation with chains, are carried out by certain individuals in order to convey their profound sadness and to memorialise the physical and emotional suffering that the martyrs of Karbala endured. Despite the fact that Tātibir, which symbolises *Zanjir-Zānī* and *Qāma-Zānī*, is seen as a created tradition, its practices differ from place to region, reflecting the distinctive customs and perceptions of the local community. In spite of these regional distinctions, the primary intention has not changed: to demonstrate profound devotion and solidarity with the suffering of Imam Hussain and his supporters during the tragedy that occurred in Karbala.

Juloos, which are processions that take place during the month of Muharram, are particularly powerful public manifestations of religion. *Tazīyahs*, which are replicas of the tomb of Imam Hussain, are carried by participants through the streets in solemn processions. During these processions, participants frequently chant mournful slogans and recite poetic lamentations. Not only are these processions a visual statement of sadness, but they are also an embodiment of collective memory and a reaffirmation of the identity of the *Shi'ism* community.¹⁶ Despite the fact that the public processions that took place during Muharram in Agra between the years 1620 and 1627, in which men carried the tābut (a model of Imam Husain's coffin) and *Tazīyahs* (a duplicate of his tomb), were predominantly controlled by men, it is impossible to ignore the participation of women in these processions. Pelsaert describes the great uproar and screams of sadness that can be heard everywhere, where “*the men make two coffins, adorn them as richly as they can, and carry them round in the evening with many lights, large crowds attending.*”¹⁷ In addition to its importance in religious instruction and ethical thought, *Āzādārī* also plays a significant role. *Wā'ūz*, which are sermons, are delivered by scholars and clerics during the observances. These sermons retell the events that occurred at Karbala, with a particular emphasis on the moral and spiritual teachings that can be learnt from the martyrdom. The principles of courage, righteousness, and the quest for justice are the focal points of these teachings, all of which have a strong resonance with challenges that are prevalent in today's society. The educational component of *Āzādārī* plays a crucial role in instilling these principles throughout the community, particularly among the younger generation. This helps to ensure that the spirit of Karbala persists through the passage of time and continues to motivate individuals to take a stand against oppression and injustice.

5. THE SYNCRETIC NATURE OF ĀZĀDĀRĪ: CULTURAL FUSION AND REGIONAL ADAPTATIONS IN INDIA

The incorporation of *Āzādārī* into Indian culture serves to highlight the syncretic and pluralistic characteristics that are characteristic of the Indian subcontinent. In the course of its dissemination over a number of different regions, this practice assimilated and adapted to the local norms, which ultimately resulted in a particular combination of religious and cultural expressions. One of the distinguishing features of the celebration of Muharram within the *Shi'ism* community, particularly in towns such as Lucknow, is the establishment of *Azākhānah*, which are specifically designated areas for the performance of mourning traditions. It is formed from two words: ‘*Aza*’, (آزا) which means grief, and *Khana*, which means room or chamber. The title ‘*Azākhānah*’ is derived from these two meanings. These areas have been meticulously crafted with the intention of housing sacred symbols that are related to Muharram observances. These symbols include the *Alam*, *Tazīyah*, and *Jhola*, which are a manifestation of the community's profound veneration and dedication to commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussain. *Āzādārī* ceremonies, which are held in northern India, have been known to combine elements of indigenous Indian music, poetry, and art. This has resulted in the enrichment of mourning rituals with cultural layers that are specific to the region. By expertly blending the Persian tradition of epic poetry with the rich linguistic and cultural history of India, the *Marsīyahs* and *Nauha*, which were penned in Persian and Urdu by renowned poets like Mir Anis and Mirza Dabeer, are considered to be masterpieces of literary art. The cultural significance of these works goes beyond the *Shi'ism* community, becoming a part of the wider literary and emotional landscape of the subcontinent. These works, which are frequently packed with themes of sadness and loss, have a profound impact on Indian audiences.^{18, 19} Lines from the *Marsīyahs* (مرثیہ)، such as *Lailā kī Chodīyah Tūtī*, *Dhūlān*, and *Subhāg Lutā* inspire profound imagery of sorrow and devotion. These lines not only express the particular grief that is associated with the Muharram observances, but they also reflect the universal human experience of loss and mourning. By combining the literary legacy of Persian literature with the cultural expressions of Indian culture, *Āzādārī* emerges as a cultural phenomenon that is genuinely exceptional.

The *Tazīyah*, which is a reproduction of the mausoleum of Imam Hussain and his brother Hasan, is derived from the Arabic phrase *Tazīyat*. This term is a characteristic of *Āzādārī* and has also become an iconic emblem of the confluence of cultural and religious traditions. Amir Timur, who lived in the year 1398, was the one who initiated the

15 Brown, Rebecca M., (2003). ‘Abject to Object: Colonialism Preserved through the Imagery of Muharram’, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 43. p. 206.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 205-207.

17 Pelsaert, Fransisco, (1972). *Jahangir's India*, trans. W.H. Moreland and P. Geyl, Cambridge W Heffer and Sons Ltd, New Delhi. pp. 73-76.

18 Daak Vaak, (2022). ‘Jab Mehfil-E Yazid Mein Dakhil Haram Hue: A Marsiya by Mirza Dabeer’, Substack newsletter, Daak (blog), August 7, 2022. Available at: <https://daak.substack.com/p/jab-mehfil-e-yazid-mein-dakhil-haram>.

19 Trivedi, op. cit., pp. 57–60.

Taziyah tradition. The craft is said to have developed when Timur, who was unable to travel to Karbala during the month of Muharram, commissioned constructions to represent the grave of Hussain rather of going to Karbala himself. According to legend, he was the one who built the very first *Taziyah*, which was a particular kind of clay from Karbala called Khaak-e-Shifa. He had brought this clay all the way to India, where it was used to cover the structure. The beginning of the *Taziyah* tradition was commemorated by this event. Throughout the course of time, the practice gained popularity among the Mughals and expanded to other regional kingdoms. Replicas of *Taziyah* were made for members of the Mughal court who were unable to make the trek to the holy sites. There are similarities between *Taziyah* and the Krishna ki Rāth Yātrā, which is recognised within the Hindu community. The complex and intricate replicas of Imam Hussain's tomb, which are designed and crafted by local artists, are characteristic of the processions that are frequently observed. It is important to note that although these *Taziyahs* are essentially a statement of devotion to *Shi'ism*, they are influenced by the creative traditions of the region and are frequently produced by individuals belonging to many religious sects, including Hindus. There are components of Islamic and Hindu artistic traditions that are included into the décor of the *Taziyahs*. These elements include themes, designs, and colour schemes that are reflective of the cultural environment of the area.



Figure 1: Sewak Ram, *A Muharram Scene*, c. 1807, Patna, India. Victoria and Albert Museum.

Within the Indian context, the *Taziyah* functions as a reproduction of the tomb of Imam Hussain, while also drawing similarities to the Sufi tradition of paying devotion and worship to the grave of a saint. One example of the syncretic nature of *Āzādārī* is the way in which it is able to integrate multiple artistic, cultural, and religious traditions. This collaboration amongst communities in the building of *Taziyahs* is a perfect example of this syncretic nature. In his book titled “The Mughals of India,” Professor Harbans Mukhia makes the observation that throughout the early Mughal period, the colours black or blue were historically considered to be the colours of mourning in India. However, by the time of Shah Jahan's reign, these colours had been replaced by white, which became the emblem of grief

and austerity, particularly in the setting of Hindu cultural contexts.²⁰ The depiction of white *Taziyahs*, which became more prevalent in paintings (see below Figures) from the late 18th and early 19th centuries, is another example of this shift in symbolic color's manifestation.



Figure 2: Watercolour of the Muharram Festival, by an unknown artist working in the Murshidabad style, c. 1795. Inscribed on the back: “The Nubob of Moorshedd.- at Prayers”; in ink: “The Nawaub of Morshedabad at Prayers, a Night Scene.” The Hyde Collection. Columbia.edu.



Figure 3: *Muharram Festival Procession*, Anglo-Indian (Company School), Patna, c. mid-19th century. Opaque watercolour on mica. Attributed to Shiva Lal or his workshop. Swaraj Archive.

Additionally, *Āzādārī* exerted a large impact on the celebrations and festivities that took place in the local community, particularly in areas where there were substantial *Shi'ism* communities, such as locations like Lucknow and Hyderabad. During the month of Muharram, the processions expanded into enormous public events that were attended by people from a variety of cultures, including Hindus and Sunni Muslims.²¹ Through participation from people of different cultural backgrounds, a sense of shared heritage, mutual respect, and communal harmony were fostered. Local Hindu communities in certain locations have absorbed certain aspects of *Āzādārī* rituals, such as the creation of *Taziyahs*, and incorporated them into their own religious observances.²² This sharing of cultural and religious traditions contributed to the further strengthening of the social fabric that makes up Indian society. The architectural legacy of *Āzādārī* in India is especially noticeable in the magnificent Imambaras and holy structures that were

20 Mukhia, Harbans, (2004). *The Mughals of India*, Volume 5 of Peoples of Asia, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA. pp. 148–149.

21 Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

22 *ibid.*, 203–217. p. 205.

constructed by *Shi'ism* benefactors. Particularly noteworthy examples, such as the Bara Imambarah in Lucknow and the Asafi Imambarah in Hyderabad, function not just as places of worship but also as architectural marvels. These structures are a representation of the peaceful blending of various cultural influences over the course of several centuries. They are a unique fusion of architectural styles from the Mughal, Persian, and Indian cultures.^{23, 24}

6. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ĀZĀDĀRĪ

Since the beginning of time, women have played a crucial role in the organisation and upkeep of these rites, which have helped to preserve cultural and religious traditions. There is a significant emphasis placed on the character of Zainab bint Ali, who is the sister of Imam Hussain. Her resiliency and leadership in the aftermath of the tragedy that occurred in Karbala serve as a paradigm of bravery and resistance, motivating women to actively participate in the *Āzādārī* tradition, not only as mourners but also as cultural preservers and leaders. When it comes to the mourning rituals that surround the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the position of women in *Āzādārī* is sometimes overlooked, despite the fact that it holds a fundamental significance. While the public and visible demonstrations of sadness during Muharram, like as processions and chest-beating (*Mātam*), are traditionally associated with men, the contributions and engagement of women in *Āzādārī* offer a richer and more Multifaceted view of this activity.

Women have been actively participating in all parts of Muharram observances, including public processions and political engagement, in the current setting. This has led to the continuous evolution of the role that women play in *Āzādārī*. Alongside their male counterparts, women in India have taken to the streets in *Āzādārī* processions, carrying *Taziyahs* and singing mourning slogans. This is particularly prevalent in cities that have a significant population of *Shi'ism*. Women are affirming their presence and participation in the communal narrative of Karbala, which marks an important shift in the visibility of women in public religious settings. This transition is marked by the fact that this event has taken place.

Women have not only taken part in the mourning rituals that take place in the traditional places of *Āzādārī*, such as Imambaras and Azākhānahs, but they have also played important roles in the organisation of Majlis, which are gatherings associated with sorrow. These Majlis are gatherings where the events that occurred at Karbala are recited through elegies and poetic narrations. Pelsaert observes that throughout the ten days of Muharram, women played a major role in the emotional and ceremonial environment of the mourning that took place between the two dates. He specifically mentions that “the women sing lamentations and make a display of mourning.”²⁵ In urban areas such as Lucknow, women frequently took the lead

in reciting *Marsiya*s, which are forms of elegiac poetry, and *Sūz-Khwānī*, which are forms of lamentation singing. The voices of these women formed an essential part of the collective expression of grief.²⁶ As part of their participation in *Āzādārī*, women are also responsible for the preparation and management of holy venues during the month of Muharram. In the city of Lucknow, for example, it was frequently the women who were responsible for the task of painting the Imambaras, arranging the *Taziyah* processions, and making certain that the atmosphere was suitable for worship and contemplation. Both an act of devotion and a way of conserving cultural and religious traditions, this activity was carried out with the intention of preserving both. While the complex *Taziyah*, which is sometimes regarded as the most symbolic portrayal of Imam Hussain's grave, would be meticulously made, embellished, and shown in public processions, women would play crucial roles in these community events.

7. CONCLUSION

In addition to transcending historical and sectarian bounds, the Battle of Karbala and the murder of Imam Hussain offer a global message of defiance against injustice, the pursuit of justice, and the maintenance of moral integrity. Over the course of several centuries, the practice of *Āzādārī*, which has its origins in both Islamic and Indian cultural traditions, has undergone a transformation that has resulted in the amalgamation of religious ceremonies with regional customs, thereby creating a wealth of syncretic cultural heritage. In comparison to *Āzādārī* practices in Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan—where the rituals tend to follow more orthodox forms closely aligned with Shi'i theological frameworks—the Indian experience stands out for its profound syncretism and deep integration into the subcontinent's composite culture. In Iran and Iraq, processions, majlis, and taziya rituals remain embedded within explicitly Shia religious spaces, while in Pakistan they are often shaped by sectarian boundaries and political contestations. In contrast, India's *Āzādārī* evolved into a shared cultural idiom, drawing participation from Hindus, Sunnis, Sikhs, and other communities, and incorporating indigenous artistic forms, architectural motifs, and poetic traditions such as Urdu marsiya and *nauha*. This blending of Persianate ritual forms with regional craftsmanship, music, and language—visible in the bamboo-and-paper taziya, hybrid poetic styles, and Hindu patronage of imambaras—speaks to a broader Indian ethos of cultural accommodation and mutual respect. Women, particularly via the example of Zainab bint Ali, have played a significant role in the preservation and advancement of these traditions. They have contributed not just as mourners but also as leaders and organisers in the celebration of Muharram. To this day, *Āzādārī* continues to play a significant role as a spiritual and social force, bringing together communities, advocating for justice, and enabling individuals to take a

23 Cole, J.R.I., (1988). *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722-1856*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London. pp. 59–62.

24 Trivedi, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-187.

25 Pelsaert, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-76.

26 Trivedi, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

stand against oppression in the continuous fight for human dignity and equity.

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