

## RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF SHIA MUSLIMS DURING MOHARRAM IN LUCKNOW DISTRICT, UTTAR PRADESH, INDIA

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### Abstract

Shia Muslims, a minority community in India, have a significant presence in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh state. Shias are known for their distinct practices in observing religious beliefs and rituals, particularly during the Islamic month of Moharram, when they commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husain, grandson of Prophet Muhammad. According to Shia beliefs, Imam Husain's martyrdom at Karbala, Iraq, in 680 CE was a courageous stand against anti-Islamic forces. His tragic death is mourned annually by Shias worldwide, with Lucknow being a major center of Shia culture and religious observances in India. This paper aims to elucidate the key rituals and practices of the first ten days of Moharram as observed by Shias in Lucknow, which distinguish them from other Islamic sects. It also examines how Moharram serves a mediating function for other communities and sects by promoting a sense of unity and brotherhood. The study draws upon historical sources, religious texts, and ethnographic observations to provide a comprehensive understanding of this important aspect of Shia religious life. By exploring the historical roots, social dynamics, and cultural significance of Moharram observances in Lucknow, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on religious identity, ritual performance, and communal harmony in the Indian context.

**Keywords:** Religion; Shia Muslims; Moharram

## **Introduction:**

Moharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, holds immense significance for Shia Muslims as it commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Husain, grandson of Prophet Muhammad. The events surrounding Imam Husain's death at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE are central to Shia identity and religious consciousness (Chelkowski, 1979). Lucknow, a major city in northern India, has been a hub of Shia culture and religious observances since the time of the Nawabs of Awadh in the 18th century (Cole, 1988). The city witnesses a distinct set of rituals and practices during the first ten days of Moharram, which serve to affirm Shia religious beliefs, strengthen community bonds, and promote inter-communal harmony.

The significance of Moharram for Shias lies not only in its historical and religious importance but also in its role as a powerful symbol of resistance against oppression and injustice. The martyrdom of Imam Husain and his companions at Karbala is seen as a supreme sacrifice in the path of righteousness, a testament to the steadfast adherence to Islamic principles in the face of adversity (Ayoub, 1978). The remembrance of this event through the various rituals and practices of Moharram serves to reinforce Shia identity, foster a sense of community, and transmit religious values across generations.

Lucknow, with its deep-rooted Shia heritage, provides a unique setting to explore the dynamics of Moharram observances. The city's history is intertwined with the development of distinct Shia religious practices, patronized by the Nawabs of Awadh, who were themselves Shia Muslims (Rizvi, 1986). The legacy of this patronage is evident in the numerous Imambaras (congregational halls) and other religious sites that dot the cityscape and serve as focal points for Moharram rituals.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the religious beliefs and practices associated with Moharram in Lucknow. It will delve into the historical and religious backdrop of Moharram, the specific rituals and observances carried out by Shias in Lucknow, and the participation of non-Shia communities in these events. By examining the social, cultural, and political dimensions of Moharram, the paper seeks to shed light on the complex dynamics of religious identity and communal relations in the Indian context.

## **The Backdrop of Moharram:**

The roots of Moharram observances lie in the political and religious turmoil following the death of Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE. The issue of succession led to a schism between Sunni and Shia Muslims, with Shias recognizing Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, as the rightful successor (Momen, 1985). Shias believe in a line of divinely appointed Imams, beginning with Ali and continuing through his descendants. The conflict reached a tragic climax at Karbala, where Imam Husain, the third Imam, and his small band of followers were martyred by the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazid I in 680 CE (Jafri, 2000). This event, known as the "Karbala paradigm," represents the eternal struggle between justice and injustice, truth and falsehood, for Shia Muslims (Fischer, 1980).

The martyrdom of Imam Husain is seen as a turning point in Islamic history, one that solidified the Shia identity and set the stage for centuries of religious and political developments. Shias view Imam Husain's stand against Yazid as a principled resistance against the corruption and tyranny of the Umayyad rule, which had strayed from the true path of Islam (Ayoub, 1978). The Karbala narrative, with its themes of sacrifice, suffering, and steadfastness in the face of oppression, has become a powerful symbol in Shia religious imagination and has shaped the community's collective memory and religious practices.

The commemoration of Imam Husain's martyrdom during Moharram serves multiple purposes for Shia Muslims. It is a time for mourning and grief, as well as a time for reflection and spiritual renewal. The various rituals and practices associated with Moharram, such as the majlis (mourning sessions), processions, and self-flagellation, are means of expressing devotion, reaffirming faith, and connecting with the sacrifices of Imam Husain and his companions (Pinault, 1992). These practices also serve to create a sense of shared identity and solidarity among Shias, as they come together to remember and honor their common history and beliefs.

However, the significance of Moharram extends beyond the Shia community. The Karbala narrative and the figure of Imam Husain have resonated with Muslims across sectarian lines, as well as with non-Muslims who admire the values of justice, courage, and resistance that he embodied. In many parts of the Muslim world, including India, Moharram has historically been a time when different communities have come together to participate in the remembrance of Imam Husain, transcending religious and social boundaries (Hyder, 2006).

The city of Lucknow, with its rich Shia heritage and culture, provides a unique lens through which to explore the multi-layered significance of Moharram. The following sections will delve into the specific practices and rituals associated with Moharram in Lucknow, the participation of non-Shia communities, and the broader implications of these observances for understanding religious identity and communal harmony in the Indian context.

## **Observance of Moharram in Lucknow:**

Lucknow, situated in the heartland of the former Awadh province, has been a bastion of Shia culture and religious practices since the 18th century. The Nawabs of Awadh, who were Shia Muslims, patronized the development of a distinct set of Moharram rituals that continue to be observed today (Rizvi, 1986). The mourning sessions (majlis) and processions are the two central components of Moharram observances in Lucknow.

Majlis are gatherings held in Imambaras (congregational halls) or private residences, where mourners congregate to listen to elegies and sermons recounting the tragedy of Karbala. The halls are meticulously decorated with chandeliers, candles, and incense, creating a somber and reflective atmosphere. Orators, usually religious scholars well-versed in the history and teachings of Islam, deliver passionate speeches from a raised pulpit (mimbar), evoking the sufferings

endured by Imam Husain and his family. These discourses aim to educate the audience about the significance of the Karbala event and its relevance to their lives, while also eliciting an emotional response and fostering a sense of spiritual connection with the martyrs.

The majlis often conclude with a period of self-flagellation (*matam*), where mourners beat their chests in a powerful display of grief and devotion (Pinault, 1992). This practice, though controversial and sometimes criticized by outsiders, holds deep meaning for Shia Muslims. It serves as a physical manifestation of their sorrow and a means of expressing their solidarity with the sufferings of Imam Husain and his companions. The act of *matam* is seen as a way of atoning for one's sins and reaffirming one's commitment to the ideals of justice and righteousness that Imam Husain stood for. The act of *matam* is observed along with the recitation of elegies (*nauhas* or *marsiya*). The recitation of *nauhas* and *marsiyas* takes on a particularly significant role during the first ten days of Muharram. Gatherings known as *majlis* are held in *imambaras* (congregation halls) and private homes, where skilled reciters perform these mournful verses (Sharif,1975).

*Nauhas* are typically shorter, more rhythmic compositions often accompanied by chest-beating (*matam*). They are usually recited in Urdu or regional dialects, expressing grief and devotion. *Marsiya*, on the other hand, are longer, more elaborate elegies that narrate the events of Karbala in intricate detail. The *marsiya* tradition in Lucknow reached its zenith under the patronage of the Nawabs of Awadh, with poets like Mir Anis and Mirza Dabeer achieving legendary status (Naim, 2004).

The recitation style in Lucknow is characterized by its melodious quality and emphasis on emotional delivery. Reciters, known as *zakirs* or *marsiya-khwans*, often employ techniques like modulation and dramatic pauses to enhance the impact of the verses (Pinault,2001).

These performances serve multiple purposes: they educate the community about the historical events of Karbala, reinforce Shia religious identity, and provide a cathartic outlet for collective mourning. The tradition also plays a crucial role in preserving the Urdu language and Lucknow's distinct cultural heritage (Jones,2012).

Women also play a significant role in the *majlis*, holding separate gatherings in their homes. Dressed in black and green, the colors associated with Shia mourning, women gather to listen to elegies, recite prayers, and engage in acts of devotion. These female-only *majlis* provide a space for women to express their grief and spirituality in a more intimate and protected setting, away from the male gaze. The participation of women in Moharram rituals highlights the importance of gender-specific spaces and practices within the Shia religious tradition.

The processions, known as *juloos*, are the most visible and public aspect of Moharram in Lucknow. The city witnesses five major processions during the first ten days of Moharram, with the largest and most significant ones taking place on the 1<sup>st</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and the 10<sup>th</sup> day which is also known as Ashura. These processions are grand spectacles, featuring a variety of ritual objects and performances that symbolize the events of Karbala.

The centerpiece of the processions are the *tazias*, ornate replicas of Imam Husain's tomb made of wood, paper, and metal. These *tazias*, often several feet high and intricately decorated, are carried through the streets by groups of men, accompanied by the somber beating of drums and the recitation of elegies. The *tazias* serve as powerful symbols of the Karbala tragedy, evoking the memory of Imam Husain's sacrifice and the suffering of his family.

Other key elements of the processions include the *alam* (battle standards), which represent the banners carried by Imam Husain's army, and the *zuljanah*, a horse symbolizing the steed of Imam Husain. The *zuljanah* is often covered in a green cloth and adorned with arrows, symbolizing the wounds inflicted upon Imam Husain's horse during the battle of Karbala. The presence of these sacred symbols in the processions adds to the emotional intensity and spiritual fervor of the occasion.

As the processions wind through the narrow streets of Lucknow, mourners chant *nauhas* (elegies), recite poems, and engage in acts of self-flagellation. The atmosphere is one of deep sorrow and reverence, as participants immerse themselves in the remembrance of Imam Husain's suffering and sacrifice. The processions also serve as a public display of Shia identity and solidarity, as the community comes together to express their shared beliefs and values.

The processions culminate in the burial of the *tazias* at Karbala, a symbolic burial ground located on the outskirts of Lucknow (Hyder, 2006). This final act of the Moharram rituals represents the burial of Imam Husain and his companions after the Battle of Karbala. The *tazias* are laid to rest amidst prayers and expressions of grief, marking the end of the formal mourning period.

However, the significance of Moharram observances in Lucknow extends beyond the Shia community. The rituals and practices associated with Moharram have historically served as a means of bringing together different religious and social groups, promoting a sense of shared humanity and compassion. The following section will explore the participation of non-Shia communities in Moharram and the implications of this inter-communal engagement for understanding the dynamics of religious pluralism and harmony in the Indian context.

### **Non-Shia Participation in Moharram**

One of the most striking features of Moharram observances in Lucknow is the active participation of non-Shia communities, particularly Sunni Muslims and Hindus. This phenomenon reflects the syncretic and inclusive culture of the city, where religious boundaries are often blurred and inter-communal interactions are commonplace (Freitag, 1989). The shared reverence for Imam Husain and the universal values he embodied has historically brought together people from diverse backgrounds, transcending sectarian and religious divides.

Sunni Muslims, despite theological differences with Shias, often join the mourning processions and *majlis*, expressing their respect and admiration for Imam Husain. Many Sunnis view Imam Husain as a hero of Islam, a symbol of

resistance against tyranny and oppression. They participate in Moharram rituals as a way of honoring his legacy and affirming their commitment to the ideals of justice and righteousness.

The involvement of Sunnis in Moharram observances is not without its complexities and tensions. In some cases, Sunni participation has been met with skepticism or opposition from certain segments of the Shia community, who view it as an infringement upon their distinct religious practices. However, in Lucknow, the overall spirit of Moharram has been one of inclusivity and shared mourning, with Sunnis and Shias coming together to commemorate the tragedy of Karbala.

Hindus also have a significant presence in Moharram rituals in Lucknow. Many Hindus set up *sabeels* (water stalls) along the procession routes, offering water and refreshments to the mourners as a gesture of goodwill and compassion. This act of service is seen as a way of honoring the suffering and sacrifice of Imam Husain and his companions, regardless of religious affiliation.

The participation of Hindus in Moharram reflects the long history of cultural exchange and mutual respect between Hindu and Muslim communities in Lucknow. The city has been a melting pot of different religious and cultural traditions, with a rich heritage of shared festivals, customs, and artistic expressions (Bard, 2002). The inclusive ethos of Lucknow has fostered an environment where people from different backgrounds can come together and find common ground in their shared humanity.

However, it is important to acknowledge that Moharram has also been a source of sectarian tensions and conflicts at times. The history of Shia-Sunni relations has been marked by periods of harmony as well as discord, with political and religious factors contributing to the tensions. In the early 20th century, some Sunni groups in Lucknow began expressing support for the Umayyads, the historical enemies of Imam Husain, as a way of asserting their distinct religious identity (Cole, 1988). This led to a heightening of sectarian tensions and occasional clashes during Moharram processions.

Despite these challenges, the overall spirit of Moharram in Lucknow has been one of unity and shared grief. The participation of Sunnis, Hindus, and other communities in the rituals and observances of Moharram serves as a powerful reminder of the potential for religious traditions to bring people together and foster a sense of common humanity. It highlights the importance of creating spaces for inter-communal dialogue, understanding, and cooperation, particularly in a diverse and pluralistic society like India.

The significance of non-Shia participation in Moharram extends beyond the realm of religious practice. It has important implications for the broader questions of social cohesion, civic engagement, and pluralism in the Indian context. By coming together to mourn the tragedy of Karbala and honor the sacrifices of Imam Husain, people from different backgrounds are able to forge bonds of empathy and solidarity that transcend religious and sectarian boundaries.

This spirit of inclusivity and shared mourning during Moharram can serve as a model for building bridges of understanding and cooperation between different communities. It demonstrates the potential for religious traditions to be sources of unity and compassion, rather than division and conflict. The example of Lucknow, with its long history of inter-communal harmony and participation in Moharram rituals, offers valuable lessons for promoting social cohesion and pluralism in a diverse and complex society like India.

## Conclusion

The observance of Moharram in Lucknow is a rich and multi-layered phenomenon, encompassing a wide range of religious beliefs, cultural practices, and social dynamics. The rituals and observances associated with Moharram serve as powerful expressions of Shia identity, spirituality, and resistance against injustice and oppression. The *majlis* and processions, with their deep symbolism and emotional intensity, provide a means for the community to come together in shared grief and remembrance of Imam Husain and his companions.

The participation of non-Shia communities, particularly Sunni Muslims and Hindus, in Moharram observances in Lucknow highlights the inclusive and pluralistic ethos of the city. It demonstrates the potential for religious traditions to transcend sectarian boundaries and bring people together in a spirit of shared humanity and compassion. The example of Lucknow offers valuable insights into the dynamics of religious identity, communal harmony, and social cohesion in the Indian context.

However, the history of Moharram in Lucknow is not without its tensions and challenges. The occasional outbreaks of sectarian conflict and the politicization of religious identities serve as reminders of the complex and sometimes fragile nature of inter-sectarian relations.

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