

The Ritual

The Shi'a of South Asia borrowed most of the Muharram rites and ceremonies from Iran. But they have been discriminating in their borrowings, and moulded whatever they borrowed according to their genius, developing forms of activity and expression peculiar to themselves. They rejected the Iranian *ta'ziya*, or Passion Play; nor did the graphic representation of the Prophet and His Family find any favour with them.

Of the symbols in the Muharram ritual, they developed what they call *ta'ziya*, something very different from the *ta'ziya* of Iran.

The South Asian *ta'ziya* is an imitation in an architectural form through whatever medium—it may be wood and paper or any metal or grass and flowers or tender shoots of wheat and barley—of the idea of the mausoleum of the Imam Husayn.

This root idea proliferated into myriad shapes, peculiar to each city, and even to each guild. *Taziyas* are meant for just one day's parade along with the Ashura' processions, to be buried in the earth or thrown into water in the evening—an example of the artist losing himself in the work of art fulfilling itself as an act of worship.

In the field of literature, the glorious achievement of the South Asian Shi'a is the evolution of the Urdu *marthiya* out of the threnodies and dirges on the martyrs of Karbala' and its final establishment as one of the most essentially characteristic forms of Urdu poetry.

It may be noted that unlike other centres in the Muslim world, Muharram celebrations in South Asia are not exclusively the concern of the Shi'a. The initiative did come from the Shi'a, but the Sunni and even the Hindus take part in Muharram celebrations. The *taziyas* are almost all built by the Sunni, and the *marthiya majlis* is not only attended by many Sunni and Hindus, but many Sunni and non-Muslim poets have cultivated this form with high artistic skill and deep devotion.

The Muharram celebrations started in the Deccan in the late seventeenth century comprising Roza Khawani (the sad narration of the events of Karbala') and mourning processions accompanied by dirge

chanting and breast beating. It was a popular pageant of sorrow participated in and patronized by the Shi'i sultans, and one of them, Mohammad Qutub Shah, also composed *marthiyas*, which were simple lyrics of deep lamentation and devotion.

In 18th century Delhi, where Urdu poets like Mir and Sauda were exploring, in a fit of creative energy as it were, the power and virtue of the newly-developed medium of Urdu language, and getting free of the tutelage of the Persian tradition, they experimented with many modes of expression for the *marthiya*, but thematically went little beyond lamentation and devotion.

In the Shi'i Kingdom of Oudh, it was all different.

Lucknow, in the late 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries, was the last refuge of Muslim talent in the troubled world of North India, a spot of light and peace among the lengthening shadows of anarchy, the sophisticated, self-conscious, and very prodigal inheritor of ten centuries of Indo-Muslim culture, not resplendent with the sunset colours of a declining civilization.

Lucknow was, like ancient Athens, a closed but complete universe, and the *marthaya*, with its roots deep in popular devotion and its branches absorbing the sunshine of courtly patronage, grew like a hot-house plant into a form of poetry fit to take its place along with tragedy on one hand, and epic on the other.

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