The papers thus present a wealth of new information that is not readily available elsewhere. Their footnotes underscore the organizers’ perception of a need for dialogue, as almost all the notes refer to publications unknown in the West and most omit the standard ones used there. The plates alone make this volume a valuable tool.

It is all the more regrettable therefore that the editors made no attempt to string together the individual contributions or to provide an overview showing the relationship of one to another. Even a map showing the individual sites or even the major regions mentioned in the essays is missing. There seems to be no order in the presentation beyond the geographic subgroups, and as essays on specific sites are interspersed before, in the middle of, and after regional surveys.

There is also no attempt at coming to terms with the distinctive qualities of this particular region. Studies of the “periphery” of the Islamic lands are very much in the limelight today, whether the Anatolian borderlands on the west (as in the 2007 volume of Muqarnas devoted to the “Lands of Rum”) or those of the Indian subcontinent in the east (as in the 2004 issue of Ars Orientalis devoted to “Communities and Commodities: Western India and the Indian Ocean, 11th-15th Centuries”). The data presented in this volume would form a similar regional study, one that deserves a synthetic and thematic essay, and one can hope that the editors will pursue their interests and produce such a study.

Sheila S. Blair


With his experience in lecturing on Muslim-Christian relations and his publications on the thought of Zayn al-‘Abidin [‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 94/713)] along with other topics, the author of this book has studied sermons that are delivered in Shi‘i gatherings (majālis) in Hyderabad, Deccan (India) to mourn the martyrdom of Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī (d. 61/680).
The author has examined the history and devotional life of the Shi'i community of Hyderabad and has given English translations of ten full sermons from a cross section of speakers who have spoken on a wide range of topics. He chose these sermons out of a total of about 200, collected directly by him as well as through other sources.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I (pp. 1–58) deals with the history of Shi'i preaching from Karbalā to India and also discusses the Shi'i community of Hyderabad and the majālis that they attend. Part II (pp. 59–120) consists of the description of a complete mourning gathering. Part III (pp. 121–172) includes a detailed analysis of the role of these gatherings in the collected life of the Shi'i community.

The author begins by discussing briefly the history of 'azādārī (the mourning practice). After providing the reader with a detailed account of the events right after the battle of Karbalā, the author writes that over the years that followed, holding mourning gatherings for the martyrs of Karbalā became a distinctive Shi'i practice, the contemporary majālis being a direct continuation of the earliest funeral commemorations that took place at Karbalā itself (p. 6). According to Shi'i tradition, during the Umayyad (41/661–132/750) followed by the 'Abbāsid period (132/750–656/1258) these majālis were mostly banned, but were held secretly in the homes of the Imāms and their followers. At the beginning of the 'Abbāsid period, the Shi'ah had a brief ‘window’ of freedom to practice their mourning openly, during which Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (c. 80/699–148/765) used this freedom to establish formal structures of mourning (p. 6).

Due to the shifts in the political scenario following the 'Abbāsid rule, special buildings known as Husayniyyahs were built for Muharram commemorations in Baghdad, Aleppo and Cairo by the end of the 9th century (p. 7). As a result of the Umayyad and 'Abbāsid persecution, a number of Shi'ahs migrated to India and brought with them their rituals which sought to keep alive the memory of Karbalā and bolster Shi'i identity. By the 13th century Muslim preachers, both Sunnī and Shi'i, gave sermons known as tadhkīr in mosques and other public places and military camps in the month of Muharram (p. 7).

At the beginning of the 16th century two important Shi'i dynasties were established: the Safavids of Iran (907/1501–1145/1732) and the sultanates of Deccan, especially the Quṭb Shāhis of Golconda and Hyderabad (c. 924/1518–1099/1687). Under both these dynasties, the majālis was officially patronized and developed. Sympathetic to the Shi'i faith, several Bahmanī rulers also participated in the Muharram rites and built 'Ashurkhānabs. Maḥmūd Gāwān, an influential minister of the kingdom, was most probably a Shi'ah, who
brought several Shi'i scholars from Iran and Iraq to the Bahmanî capital Bidar
where they recited at the majalis held in Muharram. Two of the off-shoot
kingdoms in Bijapur and Golconda — ‘Adil Shahi and Qutb Shahi — officially
adopted Shi'i Islam as the state religion for the first time in India. Qutb Shahi
dynasty (c. 924/1518–1099/1687) in Golconda founded the city of Hyderabad
in 999/1591. Under their patronage, Muharram rituals assumed great
importance (see, pp. 9–11).

In 1099/1687 the Qutb Shahi dynasty was overthrown by the Mughal
emperor Awrangzîb (1026–1118/1617–1707) who clamped down on Shi'i
rituals. The Shi'i centre of activities shifted from Deccan to North India,
particularly to the Shi'i-ruled province of Awadh (1134/1722–1272/1856)
where Shi'i rites again came to be encouraged and sponsored by the state,
often lavishly (see, p. 12). The most important role in the establishment of the
Shi'i Islam was played by Mawlanâ Sayyid Dîlîr ‘Alî Naṣīrîbâdî (1166/1753–
1235/1820), known as Ghûfrân Ma'âb, as the holding of majlis and other Shi'i
practices became popular in Awadh under his supervision. He himself never
preached at a majlis, but his sons did, particularly his youngest son Sayyid
Husayn and his grandson ‘Ali Muhammad (d. 1312/1894) (see, p. 13). Marsiyya
[marthiyah] writing came from Deccan to North India where it reached its
peak under two poets, Mîr Anîs (d. 1291/1874) and Mîrzâ Dabîr
(d. 1292/1875). It was popular because it drew on local imagery. An Urdu
translation of Rawżat al-Shuhadâ’ as Karbal Kathâ [The Story of Karbalâ'] had
already been made by one Fażal ‘Ali Fażlî between 1145/1732 and 1162/1749.
The recitations at the majalis were often based on exaggerated and fabricated
accounts of Karbalâ’. By Dîlîr ‘Ali’s order his disciple, Mîr Akbar ‘Ali Ražî

The abolition of the Awadh kingdom by the British in 1272/1856 and
with it the system of landed nobility exerted a great influence on the
development of the majlis which opened its gates from the elite to the lower
classes (see, pp. 15–16). Another important factor in this development was the
popularity of the common language of Urdu in stead of Persian which was the
considered to be the language of the upper class. Mawlanâ Sayyid Siṭî-î Ḥasan
Naqvi Jâ’îsî (1296/1888–1354/1935) was among those who popularized the
modern majlis and who used simple and easy language that could be
understood by all (see, p. 18). Several of these žâkîrs were trained ‘ulama’ as
well and they also preached in Hyderabad from the mid-1950s onwards (p. 19).

The dynamics of the Shi'i community fluctuated during the rule of the
Nizâms. Under the first Nizâm the ‘Ăshūrkhânas were mostly closed and the
Shi'i azân was banned. Under the second Nizâm, however, the royal
ʻAshūrkhāna was reopened. The fourth Nizām, in the last years of his reign, appointed Sir Sālār Jung I, a Shi’a from North India, as his Prime Minister. He was mostly responsible for the revival of cultural Shi’ism in Hyderabad. He also brought a Shi’ī ‘ālim, Ayatullāh Sayyid Niyāz Ḥasan Ḥusaynī from Najaf, who built the first new Shi’ī mosque behind the Prime Minister’s residence and gave the first Shi’ī azān in Hyderabad after the fall of the Qūṭb Shāhī dynasty. Ḥ.lyahilla Niyāz’s sons continued their father’s mission. His second son Abū’l Ḥasan Ṣāhib had the biggest share in the development of the majlis in Hyderabad. His majlis was regularly attended by the seventh Nizām, Ṭīʿūsīn Ṭāh (1911–1948) (see, pp. 21–22).

A characteristic feature of the Muslim community in Deccan is the tradition of good relations between Sunnis and Shi’ahs that is mainly ascribed to the influence of the Sūfī doctrine of tafsīliyyah (recognizing ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭalīb’s great merit as compared to the first three caliphs), so that praising ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭalīb (d. 40/660) was never a purely Shi’ī characteristic, and therefore incidents of Shi’ī-Sunni conflict have been extremely rare in Deccan over the last 600 years. It was partly because under the Qūṭb Shāhī rulers the observance of Muḥarram was encouraged as a means of creating a common religious culture. As a result, the practice of tabarrā (abandoned unofficially long ago), was officially banned in Hyderabad in 1921. Several Hindu noble families in the Āṣaf Jāhī era participated in the Muḥarram rituals, sometimes in fulfilment of a vow (see, p. 23).

An important role in the development of the Shi’ī majlis was played by the Osmania University of Hyderabad along with the Aligarh Muslim University in creating a class of graduates who were not content with the old style of the majlis and brought about reforms in the genre (p. 23).

Before 1920 there were very few mourning gatherings in Hyderabad but women in North India began preaching extempore discourses, for example ladies like Laṭif al-Nisā’ who had a Master’s degree in Urdu and was a teacher at the prestigious Mahboobiya School. In the 20th century the Shi’ī influence steadily increased, an important factor in which was Zehra Begum, a Shi’ī mother of the 7th Nizām, encouraging her son’s inclination towards the Shi’ī faith such that he went on to built a large ‘Ashūrkhāna in her memory and patronized other ‘Ashūrkhānas and encouraged holding Muḥarram rituals. During the last 50 years of Āṣaf Jāhī rule, 4 out of 10 dīwāns (Prime Ministers) were Shi’ah and the Nizām’s political department (Maḥkamah-‘ī Siyāsiyyah) was so heavily staffed by Shi’ahs that people jokingly called it the Maḥkamah-‘ī Shi’īsīyyah (see, p. 24). During the last years of Āṣaf Jāhī rule, majīlis began to be held in different Shi’ī localities (pp. 24–25).
After the forcible incorporation of the Hyderabad state into the Indian Union, and due to some other regional and international events, the Shi‘i community witnessed a great set-back. Many Muslims migrated to Pakistan and other countries of the world.

Out of those who still reside in India, and specifically in Hyderabad, most live in the Old City of Hyderabad, the poorest and the least developed part of Hyderabad-Secunderabad conurbation. Being a small minority, the Shi‘i community in that region does not possess much power as compared to the larger Hindu and Sunnī communities. However, despite their size, they are still significant due to their historical legacy, concentration in a small area, public visibility of their ceremonies and their relations with the outside world.

According to the author, the process of secularization has raised questions in the minds of young educated people towards some old rituals. Also, the availability of the sermons in the form of cassettes, CDs and on the internet etc naturally affects the attendance in the traditional gatherings and the majālis. These changes are universal and the Shi‘i community has not been immune to the influences that have also affected traditional preaching in so many other communities of today (see, p. 171).

The narrative presented by the author in this book is a succinct historical and anthropological account of the Shi‘i community of Hyderabad (India) and a good contribution in the field of Shi‘i studies.

Ali Raza Naqvi

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