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Performing royal piety: Wajid 'Ali Shah's Muharram commemorations in colonial Calcutta

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Abstract

To this day, Wajid 'Ali Shah (1822–1887), the last nawab of Awadh, is remembered either as a hedonist and political failure who was forced to surrender his kingdom to the British East India Company or as a musical genius and important patron of the arts. However, few accounts engage with his personal religiosity and public acts of Shī'ah piety. This article examines Wajid 'Ali Shah's own scholarship and poetry, and considers his mourning practices and investment in rites relating to Muharram. By focusing on the era of his exile in Calcutta (1856–1887), I explore how these rituals integrated the nawab into the public life of the city. More broadly, this article considers his court's activities as a case study to explore the history of nineteenth-century Shī'ah sound art practices and examine how instrumentation, oratory, and processions were understood by contemporary Muslim scholars of religion, the arts, and music.

Keywords: Lucknow; Calcutta; Muharram; ritual; music

Between 1914 and 1919, the Urdu essayist 'Abdul Halim Sharar (1860–1926) published a series of historical vignettes and studies in his journal, *Dil Gudāz*, which were later collected under the title 'The last example of eastern civilization in Hindustan' (*Hindustān men mashriqī tamaddun kā āk̲h̲irī namūnah: ya'nī guzashtah-yi Lakhna'ū*).[1] These essays provided a rich account of the society that was cultivated under the nawabs of Awadh, especially in their capital at Lucknow (1775–1856).[2] Sharar himself was born and raised in a community of exiles from Lucknow who had migrated in the wake of the Annexation of Awadh (1856) and settled in Matiyaburj, a southern suburb of Calcutta, around the court of the dethroned monarch, Wajid 'Ali Shah (1822–1887). Having never seen Lucknow during its glory days, Sharar's portrayal was coloured by nostalgia and a developing Muslim historiography of loss and downfall:[3] for him, Lucknow was a dead ideal, and the exiled community

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[1] 'Abdul Halim Sharar, *Hindustān men mashriqī tamaddun kā āk̲h̲irī namūnah: ya'nī guzashtah-yi Lakhna'ū* (New Delhi, 1971); English translation by E. S. Harcourt and F. Hussain, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture* (London, 1975).

[2] Before 1775, the capital of Awadh was at Faizabad. For an overview of Awadhi culture and society, see M. Trivedi, *The Making of the Awadh Culture* (Delhi, 2010).

[3] C. M. Naim, 'Interrogating "the East," "culture," and "loss," in Abdul Halim Sharar's *Guzashta Lakhna'u'*, in *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition*, (eds.) A. Patel and K. Leonard (Leiden, 2012), pp. 189–204; C. R. Perkins, 'Partitioning History: The Creation of an *Islāmī Pablik* in Late Colonial India, c.1880-1920' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2012), especially pp. 304–379.

in Calcutta was a shadowy reminder of a culture that was now lost.[4] A notable exception to this rhetoric, however, came in Sharar's description of Muharram:

> the ceremony, pomp and circumstance with which the King's Muharram procession was invested probably could never have been equalled in Lucknow even in the days of his rule. After the Mutiny, a Muharram procession of *tazia*s could never have been carried out in Lucknow with the former glory, but in Calcutta thousands of people, even the British, came to Matiya Burj as pilgrims.[5]

His essays explored various aspects of Shī'ah piety and cultural practices, including the striking image of the nawab who personally took up a drum to perform in a procession:

> What greater proof can there be that the dhol and the tasha were played according to correct principles, than that Wajid Ali Shah, who was an incomparable musician, was an exponent of the art. I have seen him with my own eyes in Matiya Burj, coming out of Asmani kothi with the procession on the seventh day of Muharram playing a tasha which was tied around his neck.[6]

This vignette has become part of the popular memory of Wajid 'Ali Shah, especially after it was immortalised in the opening sequence of Satyajit Ray's movie, *Shatranj ke khilāṛī* (1977) (albeit transposed to Lucknow, before the exile period in Calcutta). As the nawab is usually remembered as a political failure and a decadent aesthete, Sharar and Ray's highlighting his active role in the Muharram festivities nuanced his notoriety, gesturing to his personal piety as an alternative facet of his personality.[7] But, in its original context, Sharar's description was also provocative: many readers would have questioned whether it was appropriate for a ruler to perform as a drummer in a religious ritual. Sharar's assertion that the drums 'were played according to correct principles' (*bajāne ke fann ke ahamm aur bā-uṣūl hone kā*) hints at a larger debate over the propriety of the instruments themselves, let alone the monarch's playing them.

Drumming was only a small part of Wajid 'Ali Shah's contribution and active participation in the mourning rites of Muharram. Customarily, the nawab spent 40,000 rupees on Muharram processions[8] and also erected several permanent structures including the Sibtainabad Imambara (1864), which would ultimately house his grave.[9] He also wrote a corpus of *marśiyā* texts[10] and took an active and informed interest in his Shī'ah heritage, commissioning and writing his own works of religious history.[11] To the best of my knowledge, the only time that Wajid 'Ali Shah engaged with Calcutta's Urdu newspapers was in 1881, when he wrote an article (in Persian) on the solemnity of Muharram.[12]

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[4] This is especially apparent in Sharar's treatment of the poetic and musical life of the royal court, which downplayed the ongoing cultivation of the arts between the Annexation (1856) and the death of Wajid 'Ali Shah (1887); see R. D. Williams, *The Scattered Court: Hindustani Music in Colonial Bengal* (Chicago, 2023), pp. 101–110.

[5] Sharar, *Lucknow*, p. 74.

[6] *Ibid*, pp. 151–152.

[7] Cf. S. Ray, 'My Wajid Ali is not "effete and effeminate"', *Illustrated Weekly of India*, 31 December (1978), pp. 49–51.

[8] India Office Records, London, Internal Branch 'A' Proceedings, File I A, October 1887, no. 340.

[9] R. Llewellyn-Jones, *The Last King in India: Wajid Ali Shah* (London, 2014), p. 244.

[10] S. M. H. Kazmi, *Wajid 'Alī Shāh: unkī shā'irī aur marśiye* (Karachi, 1991).

[11] Wajid 'Ali had Baqir's *Bahar al-anwár* (an encyclopaedia of Shi'ah history) printed in the mid-1830s; see A. Sprenger, *Report of the Researches into the Muhammadan Libraries of Lucknow* (Calcutta, 1896), p. 5. He also wrote a history of the Prophet's family; see T. H. Ansari, 'The cultural and literary contribution of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah', *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities* 2.3 (2014), pp. 181–189.

[12] *Ākẖbār-i dār-ul-Salṭānat*, 20 September 1881, p. 15.

It is tempting to view a king's patronage and engagement with religious rituals in terms of political ideology: the ruler fashions his reputation as a pious king, the defender of religion, while simultaneously displaying his wealth and largesse through constructions on a monumental scale or lavish festivities. This kind of reading has often been brought to bear on Muharram practices and monuments. In a Persian context, Rebecca Ansary Pettys notes that, under the Qajars, Ta'zieh performances

> were ostentatiously lavish, and may have served to glorify the ruling power, thus sharing some similarities to the alleged purpose of the masques of the English court. It is possible that glorification of the ruling house, reaffirmation of fervent nationalism, and renewal of religious beliefs were all served through the annual performance of the Ta'zieh.[13]

Similarly, most historical studies of Shī'ah culture in Lucknow situate the erection of imambaras and the support of sectarian theologians in an eighteenth-century context, when the nawabs of Awadh were distancing themselves from the Sunni Mughal emperor and establishing a Twelver Shī'ah identity for their kingdom.[14] Against this background, investments such as the Bara Imambara have been viewed as statements of the nawab's authority and piety: in Michael Fisher's assessment, 'Shī'ī themes were central components in the court culture; to the extent that one identified with the latter, one participated in the former'.[15]

However, Wajid 'Ali's public presence as a patron and participant in Muharram at Matiyaburj diverged from the precedent set by the earlier rulers of Awadh. In the aftermath of the Annexation and the Uprising of 1857, the political landscape had been irreparably transformed such that a new set of concerns behind the royal patronage of Muharram needed to be considered. Even before this period, the powers of the nawabs of Awadh had diminished in terms of real political autonomy. For the 30 years of his exile, Wajid 'Ali was widely known as the 'ex-king', stripped of real political responsibility, with no hope of his dynasty's returning to power. It is therefore inadequate to think of his investments purely in terms of legitimation through public piety or as defining a distinctively Shī'ah polity: the Muharram of Matiyaburj had a qualitatively different political context and social significance.

By focusing on the era of exile in Calcutta (1856–1887), this article examines how Muharram practices integrated the nawab into the public life of the city, and how the religious practices of the Awadhi community came to have multiple nuanced meanings. More broadly, this article uses Wajid 'Ali Shah as a case study to consider the history of nineteenth-century Shī'ah sound art practices and examine how instrumentation, oratory, and processions were understood by contemporary Muslim scholars of religion, the arts, and music.

The legacy of Lucknow

Wajid 'Ali Shah was certainly not the first nawab to take an active role in the Muharram processions. The rulers of Awadh commonly celebrated their Safavid Iranian heritage and

[13] R. A. Pettys, 'The Ta'zieh: ritual enactment of Persian renewal', *Theatre Journal* 33.3 (1981), pp. 341–354, at 346.

[14] E.g. S. Rizvi, 'Faith deployed for a new Shi'i polity in India: the theology of Sayyid Dildar 'Ali Nasirabadi', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24.3 (2014), pp. 363–380; H. Keshani, 'Architecture and the Twelver Shi'i tradition: the great imambara complex of Lucknow', *Muqarnas* 23 (2006), pp. 219–250, at p. 226.

[15] M. Fisher, *A Clash of Cultures: Awadh, the British and the Mughals* (New Delhi, 1987), p. 77; cf. Keshani, 'Architecture', p. 224; S. A. A. Rizvi, *A Socio-Intellectual History of the Isnā 'Asharī Shī'īs in India* (Canberra, 1986), vol. II, p. 76.

cultivated the reputation of their kingdom as the abode of Shīʾah Islam (*dār ash-shīʾah*).[16] For example, in 1767, Shuja-ud-Daula (1754–1775) carried the *taʾziya* upon his own shoulders.[17] His son, Asaf-ud-Daula (1775–1797), whipped himself with an iron chain during the Muharram processions.[18] By building imambaras and royal tombs, inaugurating congregational prayers, and patronising theologians, the nawabs systematically cultivated a distinctively Shīʾah landscape, ritual culture, and intellectual environment in Lucknow.[19] Cementing a sense of piety on both an institutional and a human scale—revolving around the personality of the ruler—was distinctly advantageous for the nascent kingdom, as many Saiyid and Shīʾah families were encouraged to migrate from Delhi to settle in Faizabad and Lucknow.[20] Shīʾah edifices monumentalised their patrons, especially as the majority of the *nawābī* imambaras also served as royal tombs.[21] When the Bara Imambara was completed in 1792 by Asaf-ud-Daula (who was entombed there five years later), it contained the largest vaulted hall in the world.[22] Later imambaras also fused solemnity with ornamentation, commemorating the imams while celebrating the nawabs. When Ghaziuddin Haidar (r. 1814–1827) erected the Shah Najaf Imambara near the royal compound at Moti Mahal, he provided a grant for its maintenance and decoration with lamps.[23] Rosie Llewellyn-Jones captured how the profusion of lamps, candles, and chandeliers cultivated a distinctively Lakhnawi aesthetic:

> The effect when all the chandeliers and stands are lit is dazzling, especially in the cool and dark halls of the imambara, and although they do not have any religious significance the presentation of elaborate chandeliers and stands was often made by wealthy people as an act of merit. Many of the best chandeliers in Lucknow were sent out from Europe and a Birmingham firm of chandelier-makers regularly exported their goods to Calcutta during the 1840's and 1850's.[24]

Although Ghaziuddin's imambara was envisaged as his tomb (*maqbara*) and some of his wives were also buried there, it acquired a far greater significance as a copy of the mausoleum of ʿAli at Najaf,[25] aligning the nawab and his local geography with the imam and Arabia. The final kings of Awadh continued the convention: Muhammad ʿAli Shah and his mother were buried in the Husainabad Imambara and Wajid ʿAli Shah erected the Sibtainabad Imambara over the tomb of his father, Amjad ʿAli Shah (1842–1847).[26] In their lifetimes, the kings constructed and maintained Shīʾah monuments to authenticate and celebrate their piety; in death, the function of these buildings was expanded to

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[16] C. Petievich, 'Innovations pious and impious: expressive culture in nawabi Lucknow', in *India's Fabled City: The Art of Courtly Lucknow*, (ed.) S. Markel (London, 2010), pp. 106–107; Y. Richard and A. Nevill, *Shi'ite Islam* (Oxford, 1995), p. 144. On Shī'ism in Awadh, see M. Umar, *Islam in Northern India during the Eighteenth Century* (New Delhi, 1993); Rizvi, *Socio-Intellectual History*, pp. 308–332; Trivedi, *Making of the Awadh Culture*, pp. 41–71.

[17] Umar, *Islam in Northern India*, p. 194.

[18] *Ibid*, p. 195.

[19] *Ibid*, p. 196.

[20] *Ibid*, p. 194.

[21] S. Mohan, *Awadh Under the Nawabs: Politics, Culture, and Communal Relations, 1722-1856* (Delhi, 1997), pp. 193–197.

[22] R. Llewellyn-Jones, *A Fatal Friendship: The Nawabs, the British and the City of Lucknow* (Delhi, 1985), p. 203.

[23] Sharar, *Lucknow*, p. 55.

[24] Llewellyn-Jones, *Fatal Friendship*, p. 203. On Victorian descriptions of the imambaras, see A. Blunt, 'Home and empire: photographs of British families in the *Lucknow Album*, 1856-57', in *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination*, (eds.) J. M. Schwartz and J. R. Ryan (London, 2003), pp. 257–259.

[25] Llewellyn-Jones, *Fatal Friendship*, p. 208.

[26] Sharar, *Lucknow*, p. 61.

commemorate the nawabs as well as the imams, thus providing an alternative format of public mausoleum.[27]

Following the Annexation and Uprising, the British authorities tapped into the political resonance of these structures in order to humiliate the city and its Shī'ah population. The Bara Imambara became a haunting symbol of the crushed revolt in Felice Beato's album.[28] Following 1858, it was assigned as a military barracks and was purposively desecrated for almost another 30 years.[29] Following the negotiation of its reopening by the city's *mujthahids* and the reinstatement of Friday prayers at the Asafi mosque, the Bara Imambara was decorated once again in 1884, 'with a profusion of wax tapers and numerous hanging lights, the whole rendered more imposing and brilliant by the addition of innumerable mirrors which succeeding troubles cleared away entirely'.[30]

As South Asian Muslims digested the desolation of Awadh over the late nineteenth century, literary forms and performance practices associated with Muharram were adapted to express the humiliation of contemporary believers.[31] The connection between the loss at Karbala and the immediate loss of Lucknow was made explicit by Shettjee Sahibjee, who wrote a series of pieces for *Vanity Fair* (republished in *The Times of India*). Sahibjee explained to his British readers that Muharram had multiple meanings for different religious and regional communities, and then specified the particular anguish of the Lakhnawi Shī'ahs:

> To the Shiahs it is something more than Lent. To the Sunis [sic] it is something more than the Carnival. The Mohurrum Carnival plays its maddest and most fantastic antics in the streets of Bombay. The Mohurrum Lent is observed in its greatest rigour in the houses of Lucknow. For forty nights there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The famous inscription on the gate of Hell may well be transferred to the gates of the Shiah mourners of Lucknow, but nowhere with greater justice than to the gate of the Nabob.[32]

In these pieces, Sahibjee developed the character of a 'nabob', who personified the post-1857 displaced aristocrat and cultural orphan—a broken man who was pining for the days of the royal court. Overcome by grief as he listened to the *marṣiyās*, the nabob 'breaks into a convulsion of sobs, and rends his black calico garments. His thin grey locks fall on his brow and cover his eyes, his naked breast streams with blood, and the wretched man grovels in the dust'. As the imambaras of Lucknow rendered visible a correspondence between the charismatic lineages of the imams and nawabs, and as these buildings had been desecrated and scarred in the destruction of Awadh's sovereignty, the laments and mourning practices of Muharram were imbued with not only pious remembrances, but also political loss, a postlapsarian nostalgia, and the collectively felt memory of recent trauma.

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[27] On other imambaras and religious buildings in Lucknow, see Llewellyn-Jones, *Fatal Friendship*, pp. 203–209.

[28] S. Gordon, '"A sacred interest": the role of photography in the "city of mourning", in *India's Fabled City: The Art of Courtly Lucknow*, (eds.) S. Markel and T. B. Gude (Los Angeles and Munich: LACMA and Prestel Verlag, 2010), pp. 144–163. On the fabrication and staging of images in Beato's work, see S. Willcock, 'Aesthetic bodies: posing on sites of violence in India, 1857-1900', *History of Photography* 39.2 (2015), pp. 142–159.

[29] V. T. Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877* (Princeton, 1984), p. 36.

[30] *The Times of India*, 4 November 1884, p. 5.

[31] E. Tignol, *Grief and the Shaping of Muslim Communities in North India, c. 1857-1940s* (Cambridge, 2023).

[32] S. Sahibjee, 'A day with my Indian cousins. III: The nabob: the man of tears', *The Times of India*, 30 September 1882, p. 6.

Lakhnawi Muharram in Bengal

However, while this particular reading surely resonated with the exiles' marking Muharram in Calcutta, too, it was not the dominant interpretation. The rites that were ostensibly dedicated to Karbala reflected the heritage of the Awadhi Shī'ah protectorate and maintained the memorialisation of individual nawabs as patrons and mourners, as well as commemorating the loss of their kingdom. Beyond this, the Matiyaburj Muharram was a statement of survival, and a celebration of the exiled community that acknowledged loss but also relished a persistent culture. In Sharar's lesser-known book on the Matiyaburj court, *Jān-i 'Alam*, he explained how local houses were freshly decorated inside and out in preparation, and described the pageantry of the processions in terms of glory, pomp, and grandeur (*shān wa shaukat wa julūs*).[33] Savoury foods—especially *pulā'o*, saffron-flavoured *shīrmāl* flatbreads, and crispy *bāqir-khānī* breads—were distributed to the many people who had gathered to explore the lit-up streets.[34] Crowds from the local Awadhi community and Calcutta, but also farther afield, collected around the royal compound: Sharar notes that many had come from Lucknow and Awadh especially for the festival, some of whom were gifted with royal favours before their return home.

The atmosphere of a regal show, the distribution of charitable largesse, and the sense of Muslims from different regions and walks of life who were collecting around Wajid 'Ali Shah would all suggest that the Lakhnawi commemoration of Muharram was a temporary extension of the rituals of the royal court, by which the identity of the king and the conceptual foundations of the kingdom were both displayed and reconstituted through the participation of the public.[35] However, we must also be sensitive to the narrative dimensions of Sharar's account that were oriented towards idealising a lost Islamic political culture and cautious, as, at times, he could be an unreliable witness.[36]

Wajid 'Ali Shah's commemorations in Matiyaburj intersected with Bengal's own history of ideas and practices that related to Muharram. As Epsita Halder has meticulously demonstrated, there was a proliferation of Karbala narratives in Bengali over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[37] Alongside these literary texts, which were often infused with courtly aesthetics or Sufi influences, Halder gestures to the performative, aural, and ritual worlds of Muharram in the region—including the *jarigān* genre—which did not always feature explicitly in the textual corpus.[38] From at least the late eighteenth century, Muharram processions had been a lavish event in Murshidabad, especially under the patronage of Nawab Nazim Mubarak al-Daula (1770–1793), as documented by the artist George Farington (1752–1788).[39] Farington's paintings depicted processions of elephants and *ta'ziyas*, accompanied by military bands and mourners, against the distinctively Murshidabadi landscape of palaces, riverbanks, and imambaras.[40] Though geographically remote from Awadh, these Bengali processions seem to have been influenced by Wajid 'Ali Shah's forebears: artists

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[33] Sharar, *Jān-i 'alam: Wājid 'Ālī Shāh ke Matiyāburj ke ḥālāt* (Lahore, 1951), pp. 188, 190.

[34] *Ibid*, p. 188.

[35] Other festivals were also celebrated as functions of the court. The nawab of Murshidabad was invited to Wajid 'Ali's Eid celebrations; see *The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce*, 25 May 1859, p. 333. The performative ingredients of kingship, especially in the colonial context, was explored in key works of the 1990s, such as N. B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Ann Arbor, 1993); J. P. Waghorne, *The Raja's Magic Clothes: Re-Visioning Kingship and Divinity in England's India* (University Park, PA, 1994).

[36] Naim, 'Interrogating'; Williams, *Scattered Court*, pp. 101–110.

[37] E. Halder, *Reclaiming Karbala: Nation, Islam and Literature of the Bengali Muslims* (New York and London, 2023), pp. 31–43.

[38] See also M. F. Dunham, *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh* (Dhaka, 1968).

[39] M. Archer, *India and British Portraiture 1770-1825* (London, 1979), pp. 124–129.

[40] These were reproduced in British newspapers, in which the *ta'ziyas* were represented as animate, mythological creatures, e.g. *Illustrated London News*, 17 October 1857, p. 397.

from Murshidabad prepared paintings of the Bara Imambara of Lucknow and images of the nawab Asaf-ud-Daulah (1775–1797) listening to *marṣiyās*.[41] Specialists in Muharram performance traditions migrated to Murshidabad from Awadh over the eighteenth century, as recorded in the *Ḥayy al-arwāḥ* (*circa* 1778–1785), which names musicians and *marṣiyākḫwāns* who fled Hindustan to settle in Bengal, including Mirza Zohour 'Ali and the three sons of Sheikh 'Abdul Aziz (Mahyar Khan, Shamsuddin, and Moazam Khan), who was also a *sitar* player in Mubarak al-Daula's court.[42] Mubarak al-Daula took a particular interest in Muharram and consulted with the British over securing funds for oil and lamps for the imambara, and muskets and cannons for firing salutes during the festival.[43] Likewise, from the early nineteenth century onwards, Dhaka and Hugli were also known for their extensive processions.[44] Thus, even before Wajid 'Ali Shah settled in Bengal, a transregional form of commemorative procession and *ta'ziya* was cultivated across northern and eastern urban centres.

The decades before Wajid 'Ali Shah's arrival had seen significant investments in public spaces for Muharram commemoration in Bengal. In Murshidabad, the grand Nizamat Imambara was erected in 1847 after a fire tore through its wooden eighteenth-century precursor.[45] In Calcutta, the exiled family of Tipu Sultan commissioned several key sites in the same period: his eleventh son, Ghulam Muhammad Shah, established an imambara in Tollygunj (1835) as well as a mosque in Dharmatala (1842). In 1841, a Bengali philanthropist, Haji Muhammad Mohsin, also established the Hooghly Imambara.[46]

Halder argues that Muharram was not considered especially Shī'ah in Bengal until the early nineteenth century, and notes that both Sunnis and Hindus would participate in commemorative rituals.[47] From this period onwards and through to the mid-twentieth century, reformist authors discouraged Sunni participation and attacked the embodied, ritual dimensions of Muharram. Halder demonstrates both the way in which Muslim authors who wrote in Bengali navigated these developments and how their texts reflected changing language politics surrounding the social standing and aesthetics of Urdu, Sanskritic Bengali, and *dobhāshī* (Persianate) Bengali.[48] As such, Bengali Muslims cultivated their own sphere of Karbala-related literature: Urdu poets who were much celebrated in Awadh, such as Anis and Dabir (below), do not appear to have been translated into Bengali, perhaps because

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[41] E.g. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Acc. No. IS.11:13-1887 (*circa* 1795–1805); India Office Library, London, Add. Or. 2595.

[42] Williams, *Scattered Court*, pp. 32–33.

[43] *Calendar of Persian Correspondence, Vol. VIII, 1788-89* (New Delhi, 1953), pp. 57–58, 127.

[44] A set of watercolours, now in the Bangladesh National Museum, depicts the parades in Dhaka; see N. K. Majlis, 'Dhaka in early nineteenth century paintings', in *Dhaka: Past, Present, Future*, (ed.) S. Ahmed (Dhaka, 1991), pp. 381–394. The Hugli processions, patronised by Nawab Khanjir Khan, were described in an early nineteenth-century Malay travelogue; see C. Skinner, *Ahmad Rijaluddin's Hikayat Perintah Negeri Benggala* (The Hague, 1982), p. 137. Later, the estate (est. 1806) of Haji Muhammad Mohsin and Manoojam Khanum maintained the Hugli Imambara; see *Collection of Papers Relating to the Hooghly Imambarah: 1815-1910* (Calcutta, 1914). The imambara was substantially developed, including the addition of the library, under custodianship of Sayad Karamat Ali (*matwali* of Mohsin Endowment from 1837). For a brief obituary of Sayad Karamat Ali, see *The Times of India,* 18 September 1875, p. 3.

[45] P. Davies, *The Penguin Guide to the Monuments of India: Volume II: Islamic, Rajput, European* (London, 1989), p. 309.

[46] E. Halder, 'Mourning in the city: imambaras as sites of urban contestation in Kolkata', in *Religion and the City*, (ed.) S. Chaudhuri (Abingdon, 2022), pp. 146–161, at 150–151.

[47] See also P. Sohoni and T. Tschacher (eds.), *Non-Shia Practices of Muḥarram in South Asia and the Diaspora: Beyond Mourning* (London and New York, 2022).

[48] Halder, *Reclaiming Karbala*, pp. 45–49.

their reception was so entangled with the increasingly polemicised world of Shī'ah ritual.[49] Likewise, Sharar's own writings that related to Shī'ah history were only cursorily invoked in Bengali scholarship.[50] Instead, Bengali writers cultivated their own priorities, including scriptural authentication, reformism, and new Bengali literary aesthetics, as in Mir Mosharraf Hossain's novel, *Biṣād-sindhu* (*The Ocean of Sorrow*, 1885–1891).

What did the transplanted Lakhnawi practices mean at Matiyaburj, in the context of British colonialism, when Wajid 'Ali Shah was no longer a ruler with any real political agency, but the 'ex-king of Oude'? Neither the British administration nor the nawab himself was ever entirely confident or satisfied about what this title actually entailed. An illuminating example comes from one of Wajid 'Ali's *farmāns* from September 1882, which was read out in the Sibtainabad Imambara at Matiyaburj. The *farmān* proclaimed that all assemblies in the imambaras under his protection should conclude with prayers for the 'health, safety and prosperity of kingdom, wealth and riches, and for increase of rank and dignity of her Imperial Majesty the Kaisar-i-Hind, may God perpetuate her kingdom, and after that for long life of their Lord and Master'.[51] The *farmān* was reported in the Anglophone press, indicating that it was received as a significant statement of the notorious ex-king's acknowledgement of the British empire and his apparent compliance. Of course, the very act of issuing the *farmān* might also be seen as a reassertion of Wajid 'Ali as the protector of the Shī'ahs of Awadh—their 'Lord and Master', who had deigned to incorporate the empress alongside him in a ritual context.

The pious king

Wajid 'Ali Shah engineered a reputation for himself as a scholar, and published many works from his own printing press: by 1877, he had written 46 works, rising perhaps, it has been suggested, to 100 before his death 10 years later.[52] These compositions spanned a diverse range of topics, from sketch comedies to treatises on prosody. His works on religious topics, written in Urdu and Persian, include: *Haibat-yi Ḥaidarī* (*The Fear of 'Ali, circa* 1875), *Malāz̲ al-kalimāt* (*circa* 1876), *Ṣaḥīfa-yi Sult̤anī* (*Book of the Sultan, circa* 1871–1872), and *Mubāḥsa bain al-nafs wa'l-'aql* (*Debate between Sensuality and Reason, circa* 1874).[53] He also composed several anthologies of *marṡiyā* compositions.[54] In his works on Shī'ah principles, the nawab aligned his views with those of the scholarly authorities with whom he had consulted: in his Persian newspaper article, for example, he criticised the inappropriate frivolity of mourners (especially women) and supported his views by referencing his consultations with Sayyid Murtaza, the son of Maulana Sayyid Muhammad, the *mujtahid al-'aṣr* (jurist of the age), and convenor of the court of the *ṣadr al-ṣudūr* (the court designated for criminal cases) in Lucknow, who conventionally made recommendations to the royal court.[55] Similarly, with his interest in the composition of *marṡiyās*, Wajid 'Ali surrounded himself with celebrated *marṡiyā-k̲h̲wāns*, especially during Muharram, when the Awadhi community

[49] *Ibid*, p. 146.

[50] *Ibid*, p. 166.

[51] 'The ex-king of Oudh', *The Times of India*, 15 September 1882, p. 3.

[52] Many works were lost in 1857 and then in the auctioning-off of the court of Matiyaburj 30 years later. The most thorough treatment of his writings to date is K. Q. S. 'Ali Mirza, *Wājid 'Ālī Shāh kī adabī aur saqāfatī k̲h̲idmāt* (New Delhi, 1995).

[53] *Ibid*, pp. 132–135, 278–282, 293–298, 316–320,

[54] *Ibid*, pp. 596–599. On *marṡiyā*, see S. A. Hyder, 'Recasting Karbala in the genre of Urdu Marsiya', *Sagar,* Spring (1995), pp. 1–15; and C. M. Naim, 'The art of the Urdu Marṡiya', in *Islamic Society and Culture: Essays in Honour of Professor Aziz Ahmad*, (eds.) M. Israel and N. K. Wagle (New Delhi, 1983), pp. 101–116.

[55] *Ak̲h̲bār-i dār-ul-Sal̤ānat*, 20 September 1881, p. 15; on Murtaza, see Rizvi, *Socio-Intellectual History*, pp. 84–85.

at Matiyaburj temporarily expanded due to new migrants who came especially to join in with the king's commemorations. The nawab occasionally played host to the students of the celebrated *marṡiyā* poets Mir Anis (1803–1874) and Mirza Dabir (1803–1875), but also retained a number of *marṡiyā* lyricists with him in Matiyaburj: according to Sharar, these included Khwaja Aftab al-Daula Qalaq (d. 1879) and lesser-known writers who wrote under the pen names (*takhalluṣ*) of Hanur,[56] Nashtar, Sharaf,[57] and Rashk.[58] Wajid 'Ali commissioned *marṡiyās* from his assembled poets, but also earned a reputation for his own compositions and recitals. Customarily, he would ascend the *minbar* in the imambara at 10 o'clock in the evening and recite for two hours.[59]

Wajid 'Ali's own *marṡiyās* had several distinctive features and he approached the Karbala narrative from multiple perspectives. In one set of verses, he introduced his meditations by discussing the imams from a cosmological perspective, contemplating the trace of 'Ali's presence in the world prior to his birth: his 'exalted name is a bright star' (*ism-i mu'alla najm roshan hai*) that shines through the Pentateuch, the Gospels, the Zoroastrian scriptures, and, he declared, 'in the ancient book of the Hindus there is a glimpse of the people of faith' (*kitāb-i der-i hindūen naẓārah ahl-i dīn men hai*).[60] There are several dimensions to this portrayal. Firstly, by tracing the light of the imam through earlier histories of revelation—and going outside the framework of the people of the book to encompass Hindu texts (though here in the singular, the one *kitāb*)—Wajid 'Ali echoed the tradition of the *nūr Muḥammadī*, by which the light of the Prophet has a long precedent in the world before its earthly manifestation. This evocation of 'Ali through the language of sacred light was a favoured theme in South Asian Shī'ah poetry.[61] This prehistory of the imams is not entirely disembodied, as the presence of 'Ali is anchored to his name, which is inscribed in text before his coming. Wajid 'Ali followed occurrences of the syllabic presence of 'Ali, seeing vocalisation as a form of manifestation: 'seen in the word *īlyā*, his form is found' (*ki lafẓ īlyā dekhā isi ṣūrat se pāyā hai*). In context, *īlyā* is understood as Elias or Jerusalem but, to the discerning, the name of 'Ali is in fact imbedded in the arrangement of letters. Conscious of the sonic qualities of *marṡiyā* in performance, Wajid 'Ali elaborated the titles and vocations of 'Ali's name:

mulāqāt-i 'alī luṭf-i mulāqāt-i 'alī hai bas
'alī a'lā 'ulā lafẓ mu'allā 'ālī wa aqdas

The encounter with 'Ali, the beauty of the encounter of 'Ali, is this:
'Ali, highest of the highest, exalted word, high and holy.[62]

This alliterative verse is constructed from permutations of the Arabic root of 'Ali's name (*ain', lām, ye*) and explores the radiance that is inherent in the letters themselves.

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[56] Hanur was the king's librarian and his student in poetry; see W. 'Ali Shah, *Banī* (Calcutta, 1877), p. 246.

[57] One of Sharaf's verses is included in *ibid*, p. 233.

[58] Sharar, *Jān*, p. 189. Sharar also suggests that Muzaffar Ali Asir (1801–1881) was present at these assemblies, but this may be inaccurate: Wajid Ali Shah rebuked Asir for abandoning him in 1856 and moving to Rampur instead of Calcutta; see Shah, *Banī*, pp. 236–237.

[59] Sharar, *Jān*, p. 189.

[60] Kazmi, *Wajid 'Alī Shāh*, pp. 164–165.

[61] See S. Kugle, *When Sun Meets Moon: Gender, Eros, and Ecstasy in Urdu Poetry* (Chapel Hill, 2016), pp. 127, 238; A. A. Irani, 'The prophetic principle of light and love: *Nūr Muḥammad* in early modern Bengali literature', *History of Religions* 55.4 (2016), pp. 391–428. Divine light was also an important trope in Mughal political ideology, as the Mongol nobles were said to have descended from the princess Alanqua, who was impregnated by a beam of light; see L. Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire: Memory and Dynastic Politics in Early Modern South and Central Asia* (London, 2012), p. 54. I am grateful to Eve Tignol for drawing my attention to this parallel.

[62] Kazmi, *Wajid 'Alī Shāh*, p. 166.

Secondly, the light of 'Ali is posited as a synecdoche for Islam, as 'Ali is the Prince of Believers (*amir al-mumanīn*), and the traces of his presence before his coming also foretell the inevitable advent of the pious. Wajid 'Ali expanded on this dimension in his reflections on the aftermath of Karbala, whereby he took the legacy of 'Ali upon himself:

> *kis ke zirah meṅ tan pah sanvārūṅgā yā 'alī*
> *jangal meṅ kis ko ab maiṅ pakārūṅgā yā 'alī*
> *ab kiskā k̲h̲od sar se utārūṅgā yā 'alī*
> *kis ṭaraḥ apne dil ko ubhārūṅgā yā 'alī*
> *bastī milī jo k̲h̲āk men vīrānah ho gayā*
> *ghar ṣāḥib-i 'azā kā 'azā-k̲h̲ānah ho gayā*

> Whose body shall I adorn with chainmail? Oh 'Ali!
> Now in the jungle, whom shall I call? Oh 'Ali!
> Now from whose head shall I prise off a helmet? Oh 'Ali!
> How shall I stir up my own heart? Oh 'Ali!
> I found a town in the dust, laid waste,
> My own house is now a house of mourning for the one who mourns.

> *ak̲h̲tar du'ā karo ki hai bāb-i qabūl vā*
> *āqā-e do jahāṅ se ye kartā hūṅ iltijā*
> *bulvāie najaf meṅ mujhe bahr-i kibriyā*
> *ṣeḥḥat mujhe naṣīb ho aur dījie shifā*
> *bar lāie ye ārzū ḥaidar ke vāsṭe*
> *mujhko shifā ho sibṭ-i payambar ke vāsṭe*

> Akhtar, pray that this matter is accepted—oh!
> I entreat the Lord of the two worlds
> Excelling in majesty, he called me to Najaf
> May health be my destiny, heal me more
> By Haidar, may this wish be fulfilled
> By the lineage of Prophets, may I be healed.[63]

Concluding a *mars̱iyā* with these verses was in some sense conventional: turning the tragedy of the battlefield at Karbala into a personal experience of bewilderment and grief, and then invoking blessings in the name of the imam. Wajid 'Ali drew the narrative into a distinctively Hindustani landscape, choosing the Sanskritic *jangal* and *bastī* rather than more Persianate synonyms.

The personalisation in these verses gestures towards a third dimension of Wajid 'Ali's treatment of Karbala, namely his relating the trials that he had personally suffered to the experience of the imams. Muharram performances have the potential to conflate historical tragedy and individual loss. In these examples, his own house became a house of mourning (*'azā-k̲h̲ānah*), the royal court was transformed into an imambara, and he concluded his prayers by asking for his own restitution, as though he himself had been brought down. Though Wajid 'Ali Shah was too subtle to associate himself with the imam directly, his meditations on names seem to have been influenced by his own. Aside from being named after the imam himself, he also called 'Ali a Shah and the 'Shah of Shahs' (*shāhanshāh nām-i k̲h̲ub*

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[63] *Ibid*, p. 238. Akhtar was Wajid 'Ali Shah's *tak̲h̲alluṣ*.

shāh kā). Reciting his *marṣiyās* from the *minbar*, Wajid 'Ali thus expressed his personal reflections as very public expressions of both his piety and the tensions of his status as an exiled king.

The pious queen

Royal women shared the nawab's prerogative to commemorate Karbala. Wajid 'Ali Shah only presided over public processions and *majālis* (assemblies, sing. *majlis*), which were predominantly male affairs. That said, according to one tradition, celebrity courtesans in Lucknow were invited to perform elegies in the imambaras[64] and there is also evidence of women who performed in the dramatic re-enactments of the Karbala narrative, as described by Shettjee Sahibjee:

> a circle of ladies, who in loud tones sing merciahs [sic] or dirges to the memory of Ali and Hoossein, and keep time to the beating of breasts. It is a fearful sight to behold those frail forms gyrating and leaping and writhing in an agony of religious love and lamentation. They carry their imagination to the period of the tragedy, they place a bier at their feet to complete the illusion, and assume the character of the wife-lover of Hoossein with a reality and passion which Mrs. Siddons could never have conjured out of the depth of her dramatic fantasy.[65]

Besides these male-dominated or mixed gatherings, there were *majālis* that were dedicated to female mourners.[66] In early nineteenth-century Lucknow, Badshah Begam, the wife of Ghaziuddin Haidar, introduced several new ceremonies to the life of the court and erected a replica of the mausoleum of the imams in the *zenānā* (women's quarters) for her own rituals.[67]

Although there are fewer insights into women's gatherings from archival sources, it is apparent that female assemblies had distinctive practices and emotional responses.[68] In a well-known description, Mrs Meer Hassan Ali (1832) underlined the force of emotion that was displayed by women in these settings:

> In commemorating this remarkable event in Mussulmaun history, the expressions of grief, manifested by the ladies, are far greater, and appear to me more lasting than with the other sex; indeed, I never could have given credit to the extent of their bewailings, without witnessing, as I have done for many years, the season for tears

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[64] Sharar refers in particular to one courtesan called Haidari; see *Lucknow*, p. 139. However, there is no mention of courtesans' reputations for *marṣiyā-k͟hwān* in *taẕkiras* that were dedicated to them, even in the entries for women named Haidari or Haidari Khanum; see M. A. Bari, *Taẕkirat-ul k͟hawātīn* (Lucknow, 1900). On these *taẕkiras*, see R. D. Williams, 'Songs between cities: listening to courtesans in colonial North India', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 27.4 (2017), pp. 591–610.

[65] Sahibjee, 'Day with my Indian cousins', p. 6. For female orators (*zakira*), see D. D'Souza, 'Gendered ritual and the shaping of Shi'ah identity', in *Shared Idioms, Sacred Symbols, and the Articulation of Identities in South Asia*, (eds.) K. Pemberton and M. Nijhawan (New York, 2009), pp. 198–201. Sarah Siddons (1755–1831) was a famous English tragic actress.

[66] Daughters of male *marṣiyā-k͟hwāns* were also known to learn the conventions of *marṣiyā* recitation, suggesting forms of overlap and exchange between the male and female *majlis*; see C. M. Naim, *Urdu Texts and Contexts: The Selected Essays of C.M. Naim* (Delhi, 2004), p. 209.

[67] Umar, *Islam in Northern India*, p. 199. On the history of royal women in the Awadh court, see N. J. Abbott, *Women, Wealth and the State in Early Colonial India: The Begams of Awadh* (Edinburgh, 2024).

[68] See K. G. Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism* (Chapel Hill, 2011); E. Halder, 'Shia women and their "place-making": gendered agency in the *Muharram* gatherings in Kolkata', in *Women Speak Nation: Gender, Culture, and Politics*, (ed.) P. Ray (Abingdon, 2020), pp. 59–78.

and profound grief return with the month of Mahurrum. In sorrowing for the mar-
tyred Emaums, they seem to forget their private griefs; the bereavement of a beloved
object even is almost overlooked in the dutiful remembrance of Hasan and Hosein at
this period; and I have had opportunities of observing this triumph of religious feel-
ing in women, who are remarkable for their affectionate attachment to their children,
husbands, and parents; they tell me, 'We must not indulge selfish sorrows of our own,
whilst the Prophet's family alone have a right to our tears'.[69]

In the context of the internal courtly politics at Matiyaburj, the women's *majlis* became
sites of tension. Wajid 'Ali Shah had several hundred *mut'a* (fixed-term contract) wives, on
whom he lavished attention and musical training. This fuelled a drawn-out hostility with his
senior *nikāh* wife, Khas Mahal (*circa* 1817–1894), who was routinely humiliated and under-
mined in court. Although the king and queen collaborated together as poets and lyricists,
and were both personally invested patrons of music, their marriage was fraught and often
acrimonious.[70] In Calcutta, Khas Mahal became increasingly estranged from Wajid 'Ali and,
in 1864, she petitioned the viceroy and governor-general, Sir J. L. M. Lawrence, to assist her
in setting up her own semi-independent household.[71] In her letters to Lawrence, she com-
plained that her husband was undermining her courtly prerogatives and religious freedom:
her senior status in court was dependent on rituals, and any changes in her customary priv-
ileges could wreck her position. Wajid 'Ali and his servants had discontinued markers of her
social status, including the presentation of arms and the sounding of the *naubat* ensemble
(of drums and trumpets, a sonic emblem of regal presence), and 'on occasions of festivals
the king is so unmindful of my rank and circumstance, that he commands my presence in
the houses of his females, and is angry if I do not comply'. She informed Lawrence that her
customary patronage of *majālis* during Muharram was being countermanded: other Begums
were being permitted to continue to hold their own *majālis*, but her relatives and guests had
been barred from attending her mourning assemblies. This indicates that there were a set
of women's *majālis* that were jostling against each other within the court community.

Muharram was a key component in Khas Mahal's appeal to the viceroy: the *majlis* repre-
sented a political prerogative and her religious freedom, as well as her status as a cultural
patron. Ordinarily, Khas Mahal would hold music parties (*jalsa*) almost daily, as well as larger
entertainments during festivals and family life events.[72] The varieties of musical perfor-
mance that were associated with these parties—the particular genres of song and dance,
and repertoires of instrumental music—were considered to be incompatible with the solem-
nity of Muharram (the English word 'music' is unhelpfully broad in the Islamicate context,
in which forms of performance and aural art are differentiated on the basis of content, con-
text, and intention).[73] Likewise, the queen did not hold music sessions on Thursdays, which
were also set apart for remembrance. During Muharram, Khas Mahal would organise a *majlis*
instead of a *jalsa*, but both kinds of gathering were understood as being emblematic of her
status as a cultural patron. Khas Mahal reminded the viceroy that the *majlis* was basic to her
maintaining her position within the Shī'ah royal family, and also to the wider public, as this

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[69] Mrs M. H. Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India* (Oxford, 1917 [1832]), p. 24.

[70] Williams, *Scattered Court*, pp. 131–155.

[71] Letter from Nawab Khas Mahal Begum to Sir J. L. M. Lawrence, 30 June, 1864; see India Office Records,
L/PS/6/534, Coll 2/19, June 1864–Oct 1864. Cf. National Archives of India, Foreign, Political A, November 1864,
nos. 269–270. Portions of this section overlap with material in my book; see Williams, *Scattered Court*, p. 138.

[72] Williams, *Scattered Court*, p. 143.

[73] See L. I. Al Faruqi, 'Music, musicians and Muslim law', *Asian Music* 17.1 (1985), pp. 3–36; D. Pinault, *Horse of
Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India* (Basingstoke, 2001); R. Qureshi, 'Islamic music in an Indian environment: the
Shi'a Majlis', *Ethnomusicology* 25.1 (1981), pp. 41–71.

was a pious enjoyment 'to which all the Faithful are admitted without distinction'.[74] Hence, for Khas Mahal, the suppression of her *majālis* was a demonstrable affront to her reputation and gestured to the improper penetration of Wajid 'Ali's influence into the exclusively female assemblies that were dependent upon her beneficence.

Processions and drums

If the women's *majlis* was a relatively restricted form of commemoration, then the *ta'ziya* processions were the most visible and audible, and naturally attracted the most attention from illustrators, journalists, the police, and religious reformers. Even so, the Muharram processions of Calcutta did not feature as prominently in local news reports as those that took place in Bombay, which, by the late nineteenth century, were described in detail every year in the Anglophone press. In September 1887, the Bombay processions included children dressed in bloodied clothes who were mounted on horses (representing the children of Husain), followed by a procession of horses, mourners, bullock carts, banners, and the figure of the decapitated body of Husain, studded with arrows and drawn upon a bier. Besides the processions, Bombay assemblies included dramatic representations of the Karbala narrative—termed 'passion plays' by the British—that were performed by casts of up to 30 people.[75] The same format was followed in events that were hosted by the Aga Khan at Mazagon, to which European notables were invited. Both the 'passion play' and processions were routinely announced and listed in Bombay's newspapers under 'Today's Engagements':[76] British journalists were particularly struck by the participants who were dressed as tigers, lions, bears, and monkeys, occasionally accessorised with European hats.[77]

Although Lucknow cultivated a tradition of *ta'ziya* design, Sharar's descriptions of the Matiyaburj Muharram were oriented towards sound rather than visual spectacle, describing in particular the elegiac *marsiyā* and *soz-khwānī* genres and the drumming ensembles. The most dramatic description in his account is of the king taking up a *ṭāsha* drum around his own neck and playing it while marching with the mourners on the seventh day. Sharar reminded his readers that the king was a celebrated musician: 'Expert singers carrying *ḍhol*s accompanied him and he was surrounded by his court favourites. He played the *ṭāsha* with such delicacy and skill that even people who did not understand music applauded him. I have also seen him playing the *ḍhol*.'[78] Wajid 'Ali was famed as an extremely talented instrumentalist (especially on the sitar and tabla), a percussionist, a lyricist (esteemed for many genres, though most famously *ṭhumrī*), and dance choreographer. He was also an erudite and innovative musicologist, and wrote treatises on musical theory and practice, first in Lucknow in Persian (*Ṣaut al-mubārak*, 'Voice of the blessed', 1852–1853), and then in Matiyaburj in Urdu (*Banī*, 'Bride', 1877).[79] The skills that Wajid 'Ali cultivated in courtly

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[74] India Office Records, L/PS/6/534, Coll 2/19, June 1864–Oct 1864. For patronage by queens, see G. C. Kozlowski, 'Private lives and public piety: women and the practice of Islam in Mughal India', in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, (ed.) G. R. G. Hambly (New York, 1998), pp. 469–488.

[75] 'The Mohurrum', *The Times of India*, 20 October 1885, p. 2.

[76] E.g. *The Times of India*, 23 December 1879, p. 3.

[77] 'The Mohurrum', *The Times of India*, 29 September 1887, p. 4. On colonial depictions of Muharram, see D. Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (New York, 1992), pp. 63–76; R. Siebenga, 'Picturing Muharram: images of a colonial spectacle, 1870-1915', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 36.4 (2013), pp. 626–643; R. M. Brown, 'Abject to object: colonialism preserved through the imagery of Muharram', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 43 (2003), pp. 203–217.

[78] Sharar, *Lucknow*, pp. 151–152. I have amended the transliteration of instruments for consistency.

[79] Williams, *Scattered Court*, pp. 104–128; K. B. Schofield, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India: Histories of the Ephemeral, 1748-1858* (Cambridge, 2024), pp. 219–223.

Figure 1. Muharram procession from *Sarmāya-yi 'Ishrat* (1874–1875).

music were transferrable to other performance practices that did not share the same social and religious connotations as did *mūsīqī*.[80]

Sharar's comments on the nawab's expertise with the *ṭāsha* and *ḍhol* relate to a larger discussion over the propriety, social connotations, and significance of the performing arts. Writings on sound and music proliferated over the early modern period in Persian, Sanskrit, and several vernacular languages. Wajid 'Ali's *Ṣaut al-mubārak* was the last north Indian musicological work to be written in Persian, and his later decision to write in Urdu was part of a larger turn in the field. In other Urdu treatises, such as Muhammad Karam Imam's *Ma'dan al-mūsīqī* (1856–1869), Muhammad Mardan 'Ali Khan's *Ghunca-yi rāg* (1863), and Sadiq 'Ali Khan's *Sarmāya-yi 'ishrat* (1874–1875), we find contemporary perspectives on musical practice and society, including reflections on dance that were directly inspired by Wajid 'Ali's work. Sadiq 'Ali Khan compiled a thoroughly researched section on how to manufacture and play instruments, and included a lengthy discussion of the drumming ensembles that featured in Muharram.[81] One illustration presents 10 people: the troop headman; two *'alam* and flagbearers; two drummers (*ṭabbāl*) beating *ṭāshas* that are strung from their necks; two beating large *ḍhols*; another man playing cymbals (*jhāṅjh*); a drummer on the smaller *marfa*; and finally a trumpeter on a long *turī* (Figure 1).

Sadiq 'Ali Khan's entry on the procession was a summary of the interviews that he had conducted with a *ṭāsha* master who was based in Delhi, whom he described as an old 'servant' from the days of the last emperor (*qadīm malāzam shāhī dehlī men*). This *ustād* possessed a Persian account of the instruments, which Sadiq 'Ali relayed in Urdu so that the uninitiated might appreciate and perhaps even manufacture drums of their own. While the entries for other drums are technical and narrowly focussed on the instrument and its performance, the *ṭāsha ustād*'s account provides an extended discussion about Karbala, with an emphasis on the materiality of objects that became entangled in the narrative. The reader learns, in dramatic detail, about the oppression of the *kāfirs* and the intervention of the angel Jibril, who tore a branch from the *ṭūbā* tree in Paradise as a spear for the imam. The

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[80] Al Faruqi, 'Music'.

[81] S. 'Ali Khan, *Sarmāya-yi 'Ishrat: Mu'arrif Qānun-i Mūsiqī* (Delhi, 1884 [1874–1875]), pp. 302–307.

drums adorned the righteous in battle and, as they were played mid-charge, they left the enemy terrified and stupefied (*mutaḥaiyir*).[82] This picks up on an established motif of pious drummers who broke the strength of their oppressors or, alternatively, shattered the idols of non-Muslims through the devastating resonance of their instruments.[83] Sadiq ‘Ali Khan’s entry also included a series of prayers and invocations to accompany every strand of the procession, for reciting alongside each instrument.[84] Finally, he prescribed the drumming *bols* (syllables) for the main repertoires, including for the ‘Imperial Procession’ (*bol bādshāhī savārī*), the *mātam* portion, the ‘Husaini’, and the *kalīma.*

Richard Wolf has explored the modes of interpretation of these repertoires in contemporary practice and discerned how these drumming portions have the potential to communicate specific connotations and texts.[85] In his ethnographic research, Wolf’s informants associated the *savārī* with ‘the accompaniment for a royal cavalcade with Husain as the symbolic king’.[86] In nineteenth-century Delhi, even after the fall of the Mughal empire, the *bādshāhī savārī* would also have conveyed a more immediate, political resonance, and it is plausible to assume that the *savārī* of Lucknow could be taken as a regal salute to both the imams and the Shah of Awadh. If we accept this possibility, then Wajid ‘Ali Shah’s own performance of the drumming repertoires would have been especially significant. The nawab already courted controversy by explicitly blurring the conventional distinction between patron and performing musician: in the literary and painted portraits that are preserved in his memoir of the Lucknow years, the *‘Ishqnāma*, he boldly represented himself as a practitioner, although, in elite circles, this was quite nonconformist, as the performing arts were considered to be a service that provided *for* rather than *by* elites.[87] Performing on the *ṭāsha* in Muharram was equivalent to becoming a martial drummer in the royal band of the imams: for a king, this would have been interpreted as an extreme form of submission and self-belittlement. As the musicological discourse around these instruments had imbibed the Karbala narrative, this particular form of performance could be accepted as overt devotion. At the same time, given Wajid ‘Ali Shah’s own sense of calamity and wrongful exile, as well as his expression of humiliation in his *marṡiyā* compositions, one might also interpret his drum as being an expression of loss, aligning with his own fall from power and displacement—from the throne to the drumming corps—with the tribulations of Karbala.

Muting Muharram

That said, in his article, Sharar used the king’s playing as a legitimation of the drumming itself. Writing in the early 1900s, Sharar was one step removed from the tensions surrounding how to keep the patronage and performance of music separate, which were so keenly felt in the mid-nineteenth century; as such, he did not dwell over the question about whether kings should play drums themselves. More relevant now were debates over the social respectability of performers who were associated with particular instruments[88]

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[82] *Ibid*, p. 203.

[83] E.g. G. H. Salim and A. Salim, *Riyazu-s-Salatin* (Calcutta, 1902), p. 18.

[84] Khan, *Sarmāya*, p. 206.

[85] R. K. Wolf, *The Voice in the Drum: Music, Language, and Emotion in Islamicate South Asia* (Urbana, 2014).

[86] R. K. Wolf, ‘The musical lives of texts: rhythms and communal relationships among the Nizamis and some of their neighbours in South and West Asia’, in *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, (eds.) F. Orsini and K. B. Schofield (Cambridge, 2015), p. 457. On these repertoire passages in contemporary performance, see pp. 466–476.

[87] Williams, *Scattered Court*, pp. 64–95; Schofield, *Music and Musicians*, p. 222. On the *‘Ishqnāma*, see N. Di Pietrantonio, ‘The politics of pleasure: Wajid ‘Ali Shah and his manuscript, “*Ishqnama*”’, *Modern Asian Studies* 55.5 (2001), pp. 1637–1680.

[88] Cf. R. B. Qureshi, ‘The Indian sarangi: sound of affect, site of contest’, *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 29 (1997), pp. 1–38.

and whether loud music was appropriate for religious observances. In the early 1880s, a columnist in Bombay described Muharram as 'that most noisy and turbulent of Indian festivals [...] an almost continuous tom-toming of 10 days'[89] and contrasted what he saw as the true religionists with the undesirable carnival goers: 'There were bands of sober-looking Mahomedans praying and chanting hymns, while around them hordes of their co-religionists and Hindus of the lower orders, danced wildly about and cut capers to the fullest extent that human limbs will admit of.'[90] This sense of an authentic, solemn Islam that was submerged in irreligious gaiety was echoed by Indian commentators who compared the festivity of Muharram to the excesses of Holi: 'The indecencies of the Holi are no part of the so-called "Hindu religion," any more than the masks of the Muharram are enjoined by Islamic teachings.'[91]

As Nile Green reminds us, the notion of a 'true religion' that is drowning in noisy excess had a longer history. It was argued that civilised religion, the height of which was Victorian Protestant, was sharply distinguished from noisy revels, which were a precursor of savage violence.[92] The association of religious authenticity with pious self-restraint and resounding gatherings with anarchy became especially pronounced against the background of colonial administrations' attempts to regulate and police drumming processions, which were heard as provocations for communal riots.[93] Before the Uprising, European critics of Muharram had their opinions confirmed by Muslim clerics: William Sleeman (1788–1856), for example, noted the disdain of the *'ulamā* of the madrasa of Ghaziuddin Khan for 'drums beating and trumpets sounding even among the tombs of the saints'.[94] Although it was a minority view in the early nineteenth century, the clamour against processions gradually began to drown out the drums.[95] Richard Wolf notes that the *ṭāsha* in particular was criticised in certain Shī'ah circles for being an inappropriate choice for the solemnity of Muharram, as the 'crisp timbre, lack of bass resonance, and associated technique of rapid-fire strokes' of the drum are suggestive of celebration rather than mourning.[96]

Sharar also noted the tension within the Shī'ah community over the legitimacy of *soz khwānī* and chanted recitation:

> At majlises where mujtahids and maulvis are present there are only recitals of the hadis and *taht ul lafz khwani*, the spoken recital of elegies; dirges are never chanted in their presence. But it cannot be denied that the chanting of dirges, because of its widespread popularity, has in practice achieved complete victory over the decrees of religious leaders.[97]

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[89] 'The Mohurrum', *The Times of India*, 12 November 1883, p. 4.

[90] *Ibid.*

[91] 'Behind the Indian veil: from rowdyism to refinement', *The Times of India*, 19 March 1909, p. 10.

[92] N. Green, *Islam and the Army in Colonial India: Sepoy Religion in the Service of Empire* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 77.

[93] D. Lunn and J. Byl, '"One story ends and another begins": reading the *Syair Tabut* of Encik Ali', *Indonesia and the Malay World* 45.133 (2017), pp. 391–420; J. Sykes, 'Sound as promise and threat: drumming, collective violence and colonial law in British Ceylon', in *Cultural Histories of Noise, Sound and Listening in Europe, 1300-1918*, (eds.) I. Biddle and K. Gibson (New York, 2017), pp. 127–151.

[94] W. H. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official,* (ed.) V. A. Smith (London, 1915), pp. 521–522, cited in Green, *Islam and the Army*, p. 81.

[95] On drumming in South Indian Muharram contexts, see A. Mohammad, *The Festival of Pīrs: Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India* (New York, 2013), pp. 68ff.

[96] Wolf, 'Musical lives', p. 446.

[97] Sharar, *Lucknow*, p. 150. On the *taht ul lafz* and chanted recitation (*tarannum se*), see R. Qureshi, 'The chanting of Urdu poetry', *Ethnomusicology* 13.3 (1969), pp. 425–468.

While the popularity of Muharram traditions ensured their survival, critical views were propagated in print as well as from pulpits, including in the anonymous *Ḥariq al-ashrār* (*The Burning of the Wicked*, 1877), which tackled the debate through satirical verses.[98]

Wajid ʿAli Shah kept a number of *marjaʿ* (scholars) with him at Matiyaburj[99] and consulted with the *mujtahids* (senior clergy) of Calcutta and Lucknow on points of jurisprudence.[100] As Justin Jones has demonstrated, Shīʾah jurisprudence was complex and contested in this period, and these three parties—based in Calcutta, Matiyaburj, and Lucknow—had an acrimonious relationship with one another and competed for recognition as determining authorities.[101] One of the scholars that the nawab supported was Sayyid Muhammad Husain (1851–1907), whom the nawab titled Bahr al-ʿUlum, 'Ocean of Knowledge'.[102] Husain went on to write a tract that condemned the use of music during the celebration of the birth of the Prophet:[103] he did not mention the nawab though, and there is no evidence that the two had any disagreement over music in other contexts. In his newspaper article, Wajid ʿAli publicly criticised celebrants who did not recognise the solemnity of Muharram but, as an active performer of *marṣiyā, ṭāsha*, and *ḍhol*, he evidently did not see any conflict between sonic performance and piety. In compilations of his elegies that were dedicated to the imams, Wajid ʿAli prescribed *rāgas* for particular verses—especially Khamanch (Khamaj), Bhairavi, Pilu, and Jhinjhoti: these are all popular, 'light' forms that are associated with 'semiclassical' genres, such as *ṭhumṛī*.[104] While it is difficult to reconstruct how these verses were performed in the late nineteenth century, it seems likely that the nawab deployed these accessible, often endearing melodic structures to nuance the grief of his verses, tethering the profundity of the Karbala narrative in the human tragedy of the family and the emotions of the individual. In his musicological writings, Wajid ʿAli explained how he understood musical sound as a mechanism to take control over his inner life and, from his behaviour, it is apparent that he deployed musical sound as a mode of veneration and as a means to hold together the migrant Awadhi community through the shared practices of Shīʾah ritual.

Conclusion

Wajid ʿAli died aged 65, a little before 2 o'clock in the morning on 21 September 1887, two days into Muharram.[105] He lay in state in the Sultanat Khana and was then interred that night in the Sibtainabad Imambara by Prince Jahan Kadir Bahadur and Shams al-ʿUlama Muftu Sayyid Muhammad ʿAbbas Saheb, his body wrapped in pieces of cloth from Karbala, some three feet square and inscribed with the entire text of the Qurʾan.[106] On the third day, over 2,000 people filed around the imambara. The colonial government were keen to dissolve the court at Matiyaburj as quickly and as cheaply as possible. Although the cost the funeral was kept within a tight budget of 5,000 rupees (his family had requested 11,000 to 12,000), the government did not curb the costs of the rest of the Muharram festival so as not to upset 'Muhammadan feeling'.[107] Over the next few years, government officials

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[98] *Ḥariq al-ashrār* (Saharanpur, 1877). On Bengali criticism of Muharram, see Halder, *Reclaiming Karbala*.

[99] Including Kamaluddin (d. 1881–1882), a specialist on Ibn Sina, who lectured in Calcutta; see Rizvi, *Socio-Intellectual History*, p. 243.

[100] Cf. Rizvi, *Socio-Intellectual History*, pp. 140, 147, 158–159; J. Jones, *Shiʾa Islam in Colonial India: Religion, Community and Sectarianism* (New York, 2012), p. 46.

[101] Jones, *Shiʾa Islam*, p. 168.

[102] Rizvi, *Socio-Intellectual History*, p. 147.

[103] S. M. H. Faqir, *Al-durr al-manẓud fi radd-i bidᶜāt al-Maulūd* (Delhi, 1891).

[104] W. ʿAli Shah, *Mulk-i Akhtar* (Calcutta, 1878), pp. 7–11.

[105] India Office Records, File I A, October 1887, 339–350; see Llewellyn-Jones, *Last King*, p. 257; Williams, *Scattered Court*, p. 129.

[106] 'Death of the king of Oudh', *The Times of India*, 22 September 1887, p. 5.

[107] *Ibid.*

determined how to manage the 8,000 to 9,000 people who were dependent upon the court for their livelihoods, many of whom requested to return to Lucknow. As the court was disassembled and its properties put to auction to pay off Wajid 'Ali's enormous debts, Matiyaburj all but disappeared.[108] The most lasting legacies of the court were perhaps the continuation to this day of a Shī'ah community in the neighbourhood, focussed around the nawab's tomb and imambara.[109]

What did this so-called 'Muhammadan feeling' actually consist of at Matiyaburj, beyond the colonial administration's sense of religious hysteria and crowd control? The Muharram practices there reflected the liminal status of the exiled court, and the commemoration of Karbala drew together several different connotations, ideologies, and emotions. Firstly, the imams were mourned and celebrated through a multisensory range of forms, from festival-specific foods to performing arts, recited genres, and visual and material symbols. All of these practices reflected on the legacy of Awadh as a Shī'ah domain and the memory of the landscape of Lucknow that was defined by monuments to piety. As the majority of these monuments were also the tombs of their patrons, the nawabs had systematically conflated religious and royal space, binding their own memory to that of the imams.

In exile, Muharram continued to have the qualities of a royal celebration—a public extension of the life of the court. Muharram was an opportunity for Wajid 'Ali Shah and Khas Mahal to exercise their distributive prerogatives as pious benefactors of the community, and the male and female *majālis* articulated the collective identity of the Shī'ahs under their domain. The king and queen were hosts and patrons, and the prayers and processions in and around the imambaras that they had built were in part dedicated to them.

At the same time, the Matiyaburj Muharram was an opportunity to reflect upon the loss of Awadhi sovereignty, the dismemberment of Lucknow, and the displacement of the exiles. This displacement was made explicit by the inclusion of the Empress of India in the imambara's prayers and by the unorthodox vision of the king performing as a humble drummer. These Muharram practices cannot be neatly interpreted in one way: the strong sense of loss was coupled with a sense of perseverance and survival, and the ex-king performed his private despair in a startlingly public mode that underlined his subjection, but also his continuing relevance to the community that clustered around him in exile.

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[108] Llewellyn-Jones, *Last King*, pp. 261–263.

[109] On the cultural legacies of Sibtainabad Imambara and Lucknow's Muharram cultures in Calcutta, see Halder, 'Mourning'; and A. Jalais, 'Bengali "Bihari" Muharram: the indentitarian trajectories of a community', *Südasien-Chronik—South Asia Chronicle* 4 (2014), pp. 69–93.