

Indian Muslims in Performance: Ethics, History, and the Politics of Belonging

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
(Languages and Cultures of Asia)

at the
University of Wisconsin – Madison
2016

Date of final oral examination: August 12, 2016

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ABSTRACT

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“Indian Muslims in Performance” is an interdisciplinary study of the place of Indian Muslims in national culture, history, and social life through examination of diverse Muslim representations across modern performance genres. India’s largest minority community, Muslims have been rendered in scholarship and in popular culture as an anxiety of the nation, as separatist and communal, and as liminal figures dominated by Hindu society and history. Representations of Muslims intervene in how a diverse community is described in modern historiography and known in social discourse as the national “other.” Shifting perspective to materials from genres of performance makes visible new claims about Indian Muslim selves, and reframes skepticism of their belonging with evidence of constitutive Muslim relationships in national, social, historical, and cultural contexts.

Drawing on ethnographic and literary methods of analysis, this dissertation expands the category of performance to include representations in devotional settings, published texts, embodied performance, and visual arts. These performance events, forms, and spaces reveal diverse Muslim voices which articulate how they belong to India in essential ways. The stereotype of Muslims as sectarian is undermined by visions of India as Muslim which emerge from the performance text of a sacred Shi’i history developed to promote national unity between Muslims and Hindus in the late colonial north Indian context. Within devotional settings of representation, Muslims inspired by the ideals of ethical Shi’ism assert that the tenets of their faith inform their participatory conceptions of citizenship, and they declare that they are invested

in the progress of the Indian nation. While the absurd logics of Partition resulted in new ways that Muslims were construed as outside the national concept, those assumptions are subverted when Muslims enact their loyalties to India in situations of representation. In contemporary performance, legendary north Indian Muslim rulers ethically judged and labeled as “foreign” return from the past, and are given a voice with which to respond to how history has silenced them, and how society doubts their ability to be both Muslim and Indian. Overlooked in the archive and in social discourse, Muslims in performance choose India and assert their national belonging, as well as their claims on Indian history and culture.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is the result of much support, collaboration, and perseverance both on my part, but more importantly from others who believed in this project, and my ability to carry it out. I have many people and institutions to thank, and to each and every one I am most grateful.

My family is the most important source of support, perspective, and love, all of which were crucial to completion of this research. I thank Erika and Bud Hackman, and their sons Aidan and Oscar, for everything. Zack Michael is the funniest and best brother anyone could have. Nate Hagee is just about family—so I thank him here, as well.

Anna Gade is an outstanding mentor, enthusiastic advocate, and inspiring educator; it was my privilege to learn from her during graduate study at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. I am grateful for her patience and persistence, especially during the final year of writing and revising this dissertation. Her perspective as a scholar of Southeast Asian Islam prompted questions and ideas that improved my own assessments. Aparna Dharwadker introduced me to the complex and exciting field of modern Indian drama and theatre, and her support for my initial research in this area crucially assured me that these materials and ideas were worthy of further study. I thank Donald R. Davis, Jr. for mentoring me as an educator, and for his support of my academic progress and professional goals. His passion for the study of South Asia and medieval legal thought is infectious and inspiring. Anne Hansen and B. Venkat Mani provided helpful feedback on this study which improved my ideas and arguments. I thank them for supporting me and for their guidance. Rustom Bharucha of Jawaharlal Nehru University provided assistance during fieldwork in Delhi, and I am grateful for his advice and encouragement of my work.

The Center for South Asia at the University of Wisconsin, Madison supported my work with grants to conduct research, Foreign Language Area Studies awards during several academic years, and in giving me a forum to present initial ideas after fieldwork in 2013. I thank Lalita du Perron, Rachel Weiss, and the Center staff for their assistance. I benefited from seminars at Wisconsin with Sana Aiyar, Kirin Narayan, Vinay Dharwadker, B. Venkat Mani, and Christine Garlough. Dee Van Ruyven, administrative staff in the Department of Languages and Cultures of Asia, was always patient and happy to see me in her office. I am grateful to the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin for several fellowships that allowed extra time in the field, and a year to write and revise. I also thank the University of Wisconsin's Institutional Review Board for their quick processing of two human research subject applications necessary for conducting interviews for this project.

I have benefited from the guidance and encouragement of many as a student of Islam. Kathryn Babayan first introduced me to the rich texture of Shi'i history, and the Shi'i emphasis on social justice, during a seminar at Harvard which laid the foundation for my focus on Shi'ism in research and teaching. As my supervisor during two years at Boston University, Kecia Ali encouraged my initial work in performance and Muslim America, which provided the basis for this study of performance as a window on the experience of India's Muslims. I thank Kecia for her continued support of my progress, and for her professional advice. I began my study of South Asian Islam under the guidance of Ali Asani of Harvard University, and I thank him for his mentoring and input in several courses. Ali is a role model for engaged scholarship, and I learned much from his work in public outreach and thinking on teaching Islam today. His fundamental question for the study of Islam—how do we know what we know about Islam, and Muslims—remains with me, and inspires my own teaching. Barbara Petzen gave me my first opportunity to

work in public outreach while we were at Harvard’s Center for Middle Eastern Studies outreach program. I thank her for her passion and enthusiasm, and for showing me the joy and importance of this kind of service.

The American Institute for Indian Studies awarded me several summer grants, and an academic year fellowship, to study Urdu and Hindi in Lucknow and Jaipur. My competency in these languages is only due to the talent and efforts of many teachers in India and in the U.S. I thank Ahtesham Khan, Zeba Parveen, Sheba, Fahmida Bano, Qazi Asad, and all teachers and staff of AIIS in Lucknow and Jaipur. Richard Delacy is an outstanding teacher of Hindi and Urdu, and I am grateful for his instruction and friendship. At Wisconsin, I am indebted to both Vinay Dharwadker and M. Asif Farooq for their assistance during several Urdu language and literature courses.

The support and encouragement of my collaborators in Delhi and Lucknow were essential to the completion of this study. I thank first and foremost M. Sayeed Alam and Niti Phool, and all the actors of Pierrot’s Troupe, for allowing me into their home and their work. Niti and Alam are my family in Delhi, and I am sincerely grateful for their guidance and friendship. I thank Danish Iqbal and Anees Azmi for their interest in and support of my work in Urdu theatre. Tom Alter provided essential acting advice at a crucial moment prior to a performance. During initial fieldwork in 2013, one conversation with Shahid Anwar about Muslims in drama reoriented my thoughts. It was always my privilege to learn from Shahid and his passing earlier this year was a significant loss for many, including myself. I am grateful to the women of Darwesh—Yuveka Singh, Meghali Roy, Nikita Arora, and Madhavi Menon—for allowing me into their process and work in Delhi. M.S. Sathyu sat with me for several hours at the National School of Drama on Christmas Day in Delhi in 2014, and I thank him for the opportunity to learn

more about producing *Garm Hava*. Also in Delhi, the staff of the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library assisted with access to archival materials related to Munshi Premchand's play *Karbala*.

In Lucknow, I thank Sofia Aapa, her husband Nasir, and their extended relatives for bringing me into their lives during Muharram in 2014 and 2015. Sofia, Sughra, Kyoko, Ariza, and Fatima gave their time and were very patient with my questions about women's rituals. Makhdooma Sadaat, and the entire Sadaat family, have been my family in Lucknow since 2009, providing me with mangoes and laughter that sustains. I am very saddened at the recent and sudden passing of Baaji, who is a significant presence in the second chapter of this dissertation. I hope that my remembrance of our conversations is testament to her conviction and personality. *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un* ("Surely we belong to Allah, and to Allah we will return").

Friends in Delhi during fieldwork have no idea how much their support meant to me, especially during some of the tougher days. Vibodh Parthasarathi (PPG!) always gave me a home, and lots of laughter, and I am very thankful for both. Alam Srinivas tried too many times to get me to enjoy cricket, and I probably owe him for that, and much more. Every conversation with Kaushik Bhaumik is insightful, and I cherish his friendship. Mary Rodeigher Martin, William Martin, and Louis gave me an American home in Delhi, and lots of love. I thank Ruhaan Joshi for love, support, and laughter, and am grateful to Aaron Hollett for much fun during a challenging time.

I want to acknowledge friends who supported me over the years in Cambridge and Madison. I am thankful to P. Andrea Hayes, Alireza Doostdar, Ramyar Rossoukh, Anand Taneja, Chris Jones, Colleen Lucey, John Stavrellis, Sandeep Kindo, Verena Meyer, Kyle Rader, Katherine Lieder, Christine Marrewa-Karwoski, H William Warner, Elizabeth Lhost, Nick Abbott, Amber Abbas, Darcie Price-Wallace, Rachael Goodman, Julian Lynch, Alicia Wright,

Daniel McNamara, Rebecca Grapevine, Christopher Limburg, Melanie Getreuer, Kathryn Zykowski, Jacob Hustedt, Heather Sonntag, and Karl Shoemaker. For their continued presence in my life, I am grateful to Balraj Gill, Suneeta Gill, Dilek Barlow, Sarah Stoll, Alison Howe, Amir Zoka, Deborah Cunningham, Eugenia Corbo, and Ranjan Sahay. Appreciation is due to Winslow and the staff of the Caribou in Madison simply for being there for me, and for many others, who pass through its doors. I also thank Kurt Vile for music that facilitated perseverance in the slough of writing, and for amazing shows in Champaign and Madison.

This dissertation was written in Delhi, Beirut, New York, Champaign, and Madison. As anyone who has visited Madison knows, the Terrace at the Wisconsin Union is one of the best spots in the world. I end by acknowledging the importance of this space to my time at Wisconsin, where I met many a friend, worked alone in the sun, and sat and stared at Lake Mendota just to gain some perspective. I am grateful for the privilege of space that connects and comforts, especially when the same is not true for too many in the world today.

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ABBREVIATIONS

NMML Nehru Memorial Museum & Library

Introduction: Indian Muslim Voices in Performance

A headline on the front page of the October 5th, 2015 local edition of the *Times of India* newspaper prominently declared: “Muslim Youth Jumps into Well to Save Cow in Lucknow.” According to the story, twenty-year old Zaki went into the well because he saw that the animal was suffocating and distressed. The report mentioned that Zaki had been on his way home, returning after offering prayers at his local mosque. While others had offered to be dropped by a crane into the thirty-five foot deep well, Zaki insisted that he be the one to go in. That he acted to save the cow’s life was not surprising to his mother, Salma, who mentioned another instance when her son intervened to help others. “During Ramlila celebrations last year, fire from an effigy had reached some houses here. At that time too, Zaki had saved lives,” she said.¹

Internet commentators seized on the absurdity that a Muslim saving a cow’s life should warrant such media attention, with one of them wondering if publicly proving one’s devotion to cows would become the new litmus test for Muslim loyalty in India.² The online article itself (as of March 2016) lists over five hundred comments, from congratulations to the youth, to accusations that Zaki, a Muslim, had saved the cow only to kill it and feast on its flesh, to others who assumed that extreme Hindu nationalist groups like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak

¹ Yusra Husain, “Muslim Youth Jumps Into Well to Save Cow in Lucknow,” Times of India, October 5th, 2015. Accessed online. URL: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/Muslim-youth-jumps-into-well-to-save-cow-in-Lucknow/articleshow/49220304.cms>.

² “India Explained” (Rohit Chopra), Twitter post, October 5th 2015, 7:14 pm, <https://twitter.com/IndiaExplained/status/650856572894121984>.

Sangh) would be proud. Taken for granted were some of the questionable premises that underlie both the newsworthiness of the story and responses to it. One assumption is that there are doubts or skepticism about Muslim fidelity to majoritarian Indian society. Another is that Muslims are or should be subjected to various types of litmus tests in order to prove their commitments. Finally, the specific details of this event reveal attitudes—both Muslim and non-Muslim—that this loyalty test is satisfied by proving a Muslim respect for and sacrifice on behalf of the perseverance of Hindu sacred objects. Zaki’s mother’s testimony that her son had saved (presumably Hindu) lives in an incident during last year’s Ramlila celebration suggests that Muslims themselves understand the terms of this social test and its answer in how they interact with Hindus.

If one were to analyze this news event using performance as a primary interpretive category, Zaki’s public actions to save the cow amount to a literal performance of a Muslim self-sacrifice for a Hindu cause in front of his community. He demonstrated that he would lay his life down for his Hindu neighbors when he insisted that he be the one to enter the well. As a Muslim, his actions are seen as an embodiment of a Muslim ethical service that benefits majoritarian Hindu society. A focus on performance also calls attention to how Zaki’s actions are mediated by social discourses not made explicit by the event itself. There would be no need to prove his commitments if there were not a prior subtext of assumed Muslim separatism that Zaki contests with his performance. While his efforts could be read as a simple matter of saving an animal’s life, Zaki’s mother’s comments about her son’s prior intervention at a Hindu festival reveal that going into the well that day was not an isolated decision. It is part of a longer history of Muslim

actions to prove that they, too, belong to Indian society. That demonstrating their loyalties to Hindus is one way that Muslims answer skepticism of their personhood as both Muslim and Indian.

The question of Muslim belonging in Indian society is defined and debated in multiple contexts, including political discourse, various fields of cultural production, national historiography, and in everyday local interactions similar to Zaki's leap into his village well. While this uncertainty is also a historical predicament for India's Muslims, the question was transformed by new assumptions about belonging, borders, and community defined by the experience of Partition in 1947 and the creation of Pakistan. Skepticism about Muslim belonging in the national situation is a commentary on the idea of India as a national project, as Faisal Devji indicates in his comments that India's Muslims signify "a fundamental anxiety of nationalism itself: the nation as something unachieved."³ Constructions of Muslim selves as a national concern and an indication of national failure is a common theme in scholarship and in social discourse, especially after Partition. However, this narrative is not the only, nor the most important, conclusion about Muslim belonging in India, historically and in the present.

This study moves to diverse contexts of performance to reveal Muslim voices which engage and respond to the various ways that they have as a community have been construed as an anxiety for the Indian nation. In performative events, contexts, and mediums, Muslims articulate their constitutive relationships to Indian culture, society, and history. The production and content

³ Faisal Devji, "Hindu/Muslim/Indian," *Public Culture* 5:1 (Fall 1992), pps. 1-18; 15.

of a late-colonial performance text reveals how Muslims articulate their social unity with Hindus, who recognize their essential role in building an Indian nation. In postcolonial cinema, Muslims enact their loyalty to India by choosing to remain there when presented with the choice to leave for Pakistan. Muslims in devotional contexts declare that it is part of their ethical dispositions, informed by Islam, to work for social justice and the advancement of the nation. In these examples from performance, Muslims are not an anxiety for India; rather, they are essential to its unity and progress.

I: Indian Islam

Muslims from Arabia are documented as arriving in the subcontinent as early as the late seventh-century.⁴ The growth of Muslim communities occurred unevenly and in different time periods; like other South Asian religions, the diverse character of Indian Islam is a result of its development in a variety of regional, linguistic, class, and historical contexts.⁵ In terms of religious practice, the majority of Indian Muslims are Sunni, and associate themselves with the

⁴ André Wink, “From Spain to India: The Early Islamic Conquests and Formation of the Caliphate,” in *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World* (3 Vols. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), Vol. 1; pps. 7-24.

⁵ There are numerous general surveys of Indian Islam. The major English-language historiographical studies which cover developments up to the years after Partition are Mohammad Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1967); Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964); I.H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent, 610-1947: A Brief Historical Analysis* (S’Gravenhage: Mouton, 1963); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1972 (1946); and Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980). Ayesha Jalal examines colonial debates on Muslim belonging and identity up to the years of Partition in *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000). Diane Mines and Sarah Lamb’s *Everyday Life in South Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) is an ethnographic collection of essays examining popular religious practice in South Asia, including several based on Indian Muslim experiences.

Hanafi legal tradition, within which the Deobandi and Barelwi schools of thought are dominant.⁶

Sufism is a major trend in Indian Islam; the Suhrawardi and Chishti orders have the largest following in the community.⁷ Muslim educational institutions established in India have a global influence that continues to the present.⁸ They are international destinations for training in doctrinal affairs and religious sciences, and students of their programs are found around the world. Social class within Indian Muslim communities is bifurcated into the upper-class (*ashraf*) and lower classes (*ajlaf*), and the existence of caste has been shown to be an influence in Muslim social relations.⁹ Although frequently overlooked as a country part of the international sphere of Islam, India is home to the second largest Muslim population in the world, after Indonesia. The diversity and worldwide presence of Indian Muslim communities brings new perspectives on belonging and the discursive nature of tradition to the study of Islam, and of religion, in global

⁶ See Wael Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunnī Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) for more on Islamic jurisprudence and the position of the Hanafi school. For a historical survey of Deoband, see Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Usha Sanyal documents the colonial history of the Barelwi movement and the background of its founder, Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi, in *Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi: In the Path of the Prophet* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005).

⁷ J. Spencer Trimingham's *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) is a comprehensive study of the development of Sufi communities in the Middle East and South Asia. See Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), for a survey of Sufi traditions that includes regional Sufi literatures.

⁸ Besides Deoband, the other major schools of Muslim learning in north India are Firangi Mahall and Nadwat al-Ulema, both in Lucknow. Francis Robinson examines the history of and educational culture of Firangi Mahall in *The 'Ulama of Firangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

⁹ On the phenomenon of caste in Indian Islam, see Imtiaz Ahmad, "Exclusion and Assimilation in Indian Islam," in Attar Singh, ed., *Socio-cultural Impact of Islam on India* (Chandigarh: Publication Bureau, Panjab University, 1976), pps. 85-101. Margrit Pernau examines social change and mobility in the nineteenth-century transformation of Delhi's Muslim middle and upper classes in *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-century Delhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

contexts.¹⁰

Two instances of performance in this study are based on Shi'i Muslim traditions, which reveals how Indian Shi'i communities and practices have had much greater influence in national culture and social life than their status as a minority within a minority would suggest. Shi'as comprise between ten to fifteen percent of the total global Muslim community, and in India they are nearly two percent of the total population, or between sixteen to twenty-four million.¹¹ Indian Shi'ism is diverse, and it includes Shi'as of the Ithna 'Ashari (Twelver) tradition, the Isma'ili (Sevener) community, and the Dau'di Bohras.¹² In the seventeenth century, significant Shi'i migration from Iran (then Persia) and Central Asia led to the establishment of Awadh (Lucknow) and Hyderabad (Deccan) as urban centers of Shi'i culture.¹³ Today, Shi'i traditions are practiced

¹⁰ Talal Asad discusses the discursive aspects of tradition and Islamic practice in "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," in *Occasional Papers* (Washington D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown, 1986).

¹¹ Andrew J. Newman, *Twelver Shiism: Unity and Diversity in the Life of Islam, 632 to 1722* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 2. For Shi'ism in Iran, see Michael M.J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1980) and Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985). Augustus R. Norton examines Shi'ism in Lebanon, focusing on its influence on political expression, in *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

¹² Twelver Shi'as follow the teachings of the Twelve Imams who succeeded the Prophet Muhammad. For introductory surveys of Shi'i history, doctrines, and global communities, see Heinz Halm, *Shi'a Islam: From Religion to Revolution*, trans. Allison Brown (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996) and Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Newman, *Twelver Shiism*, includes a detailed review of Shi'i studies in English-language scholarship. See Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) for a comprehensive study of Isma'ili history and traditions. Jonah Blank examines Indian Bohra communities in *Mullas on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity Among the Daudi Bohras* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003), and Jonah Steinberg explores Isma'ili communities from a global perspective in *Isma'ili Modern: Globalization and Identity in a Muslim Community* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2011).

¹³ The Shi'i character of Lucknow is reviewed in Chapter three. For more on the Shi'i history of Hyderabad and the Deccan, see Toby Howarth, *The Twelver Shī'a as a Muslim Minority in India: Pulpit of Tears* (New York: Routledge, 2005); David Pinault, *The Shi'ites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992), and Karen Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, & Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism* (Chapel Hill:

around India, including Lucknow and Hyderabad, and particularly during the ritual month of Muharram.¹⁴ The discussion in this study of the Shi'i values that inform Indian performative contexts, what I describe as ethical Shi'ism, challenges the depiction of Shi'ism as sectarian found both in popular media, and in English-language scholarship. Ways in which Indian Muslims are characterized as separatist, or not, is a question that asks how Muslims belong to Indian society. Continuity and change in how South Asian historiography has defined Muslims and their identities shows how this question is shaped by developments in political and social life. It is also influenced by modern assumptions about identity often problematically applied to the premodern past.

II: Historical Background to the Question of Indian Muslim Belonging

The stereotype of Muslims as invaders from foreign lands is a legacy of historiography of the medieval period, which documents the activities and supposed motivations of Turkish military campaigners, predominantly in north Indian areas. One such figure was Mahmud of Ghazni, who took power in Multan around the year 1010. Modern scholarship tends to narrowly associate his military objectives in raids of sites with wealth and power to his (presumed) Muslim identity.¹⁵ In the words of Romila Thapar, historians under the influence of modern

University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

¹⁴ In addition to these cities, Muharram traditions have long been a part of social life in Banaras (Varanasi) among Muslims and other religious communities. Marc Katz and Joe Elder document these traditions in their documentary *Banaras Muharram and the Coals of Karbala* (2004).

¹⁵ In her discussion of Mahmud's campaigns in north India, Romila Thapar comments on the "religious motivation" for such activities, granted that, "iconoclasm being a meritorious activity amongst the more orthodox followers of

assumptions about premodern identity, and particularly about Islam, came to the problematic conclusion that, “only a Muslim would despoil temples and break idols since the Islamic religion is opposed to idol worship.”¹⁶ Representations of Muslims as foreign invaders and destroyers of Hindu temples due to idol worship is an example of the modern communalization of the medieval past. It also overlooks other reasons why military actors—Muslim and non-Muslim--infiltrated local sources of capital and authority.¹⁷ Depictions in historiography of premodern campaigners like Mahmud of Ghazni tends to overstate the nature of their identities as Muslims, as well as the role that Islamic principles may have played in their moves to establish power in the subcontinent.

Muslim communities around the subcontinent grew significantly in the late medieval period, and often through local and uneven processes of conversion.¹⁸ Sufis attached to royal

the Islamic faith.” Romila Thapar, *A History of India*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 232. See Mohammad Habib, *Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni: A Study* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University Publications, 1927), and Muhammad Nazim, *Life and Times of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni* (Lahore, Khalil, 1931), for monograph studies of this medieval figure who continues to loom large in the Indian imagination.

¹⁶ Romila Thapar, “Communalism and the Writing of Ancient Indian History,” in Thapar, et al., *Communalism and the Writing of Indian History* (Delhi: People’s Pub. House, 1969), pps. 1-23; 14. For more on Ghaznavid north India, see Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Later Ghaznavids: Splendour and Decay: The Dynasty in Afghanistan and Northern India, 1040-1186* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

¹⁷ For more on revising the thesis of Muslim iconoclasm with details of the varied reasons why military actors raided sources of wealth, see Thapar, “Communalism and the Writing of Ancient Indian History,” and Richard Eaton, “Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States,” in David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds., *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000), pps. 246-281.

¹⁸ The literature on conversion to Islam in South Asia is extensive. The two major positions in the field are found in Carl Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) and Richard Eaton, *The Sufis of Bijapur: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). See Peter Hardy, “Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey of the Literature,” in Nehemia Levtzion, ed., *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), pps. 68-99, for a discussion of the issue of conversion in the

courts, as teachers of mystical practice, and as participants in agrarian developments on the western and eastern frontiers contributed to the expansion of Islam in South Asia.¹⁹ These developments answer the question of Muslim belonging in this period with evidence of how Muslims made the subcontinent their own. Inspiration from Islamic teachings and Muslim individuals that resulted in conversion efforts is premodern evidence of a burgeoning Indian Islam.

The non-elite nature of Muslim expansion at this time is often overlooked in discussions of Muslim belonging in secular historiography, which focuses on the social and political relations of Muslim elites and rulers in north India. The Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire represent a period of consolidated Muslim power in north India, centered at Delhi and Agra (Uttar Pradesh). The matter of how Muslims associated themselves with local societies during late medieval and Mughal rule (late fourteenth-century to the mid-nineteenth century) is determined in this scholarship along a typology of separation and syncretism, determined by elite involvement in local affairs.²⁰ At the elite level of social relations during the Sultanate, Muslims dominated the upper class and served in high military positions.²¹ These relations were

nineteenth and early twentieth-century as documented by British colonial officials. In her work *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), Ronit Ricci develops a new thesis on conversion to Islam in South and Southeast Asia based on networks of literary translation and reproduction. See Nehemia Levtzion, ed., *Conversion to Islam* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), for comparison of processes of conversion to Islam in global contexts.

¹⁹ See Ernst, *Eternal Garden*, and Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, for details on the various roles of Sufis in these processes.

²⁰ Major works and approaches in this literature are noted in Chapter four.

²¹ Sunil Kumar examines the development of the Delhi Sultanate during its first one-hundred years (1190 to 1290) in *The Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate, 1192-1286* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007). In *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Peter Jackson provides

never exclusively Muslim, however, as the Sultans of Delhi appointed Hindus to leadership positions at the village level and, beginning in the fourteenth-century, as regional governors.²² Muslim elites ruled over a religiously diverse population, and Muslim rulers interacted with local traditions and non-Muslim authority in different ways.²³ Elite Muslim relationships with non-Muslim societies in the years preceding colonial rule were never simply separatist, and Muslim settlement and conversion is evidence that the subcontinent is home to an Islam that is also Indian.

In the late colonial period, a development in political and social history reveals how a Muslim cause was made into a vehicle for the expression of Indian nationalism. The Khilafat movement, also known as the Non-Cooperation movement, is a moment when the fate of a Muslim institution inspired diverse actors in Indian social life to politically unite. The movement's leaders sought to preserve the authority of the Ottoman Sultan as leader, or Caliph, of the international Muslim community in response to British intentions to abolish the institution

an account of the political and military affairs of this period, and also details Muslim elite relations with other religious communities. Kishori Saran Lal documents what he describes as the “decline” (circa 1398-1526) of this period, beginning with the death of Firoz Shah Tughlaq in 1388, in *Twilight of the Sultanate: A Political, Social, and Cultural History of the Sultanate of Delhi from the Invasion of Timur to the Conquest of Babur 1398-1526* (New York, Asia Publishing House, 1963). K.A. Nizami integrates the history of the Sultanate with developments in north Indian literatures and religious communities in *Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century* (New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Irfan Habib integrates historiography of the Sultanate period with both the six-hundred-year period preceding it, and the Mughals who came to power in the early sixteenth-century, in *Medieval India: The Study of Civilization* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2008).

²² Irfan Habib, *Medieval India: The Study of Civilization* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2008), 84.

²³ How Muslim rulers interacted with local communities is also a matter of social class. See the review of Mughal historiography in Chapter four.

following the end of Ottoman rule and the close of the first World War.²⁴ Nationalist leaders in British India linked their local fight against imperialism to the global effort to pressure the British to retain the position of the Caliph.

The diverse coalition backing the Khilafat position represented the first time that supporters of pan-Islamism and non-cooperation as advocated by Gandhi combined their political efforts for an international issue. The Khilafat movement as a Muslim political initiative gained from diverse advocacy for their cause, and the Indian National Congress, led by Gandhi, gained more Muslim support for their nationalist politics. Between 1921 and 1924 these efforts gradually failed; in late 1921 the British arrested leaders of the campaign, put them on trial, and sentenced them to jail. In early 1922, Gandhi suspended his non-cooperation movement and later that year Turkish nationalists put an end to the institution of the Ottoman Sultanate. In 1924, these same leaders abolished the position of the Caliph. These developments evidence a moment when multiple religious communities, including Hindus, felt that they had something at stake in the fate of a Muslim institution, and linked that Muslim cause to late-colonial anti-imperialist goals. The coalition which participated in the Khilafat movement shows that this Muslim tradition belonged, in a sense, to Indian national political and social concerns.

²⁴ For the historiography of the Khilafat movement, see Mushirul Hasan and Margrit Pernau, *Regionalizing Pan-Islamism: Documents on the Khilafat Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005); Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); and M. Naeem Qureshi, *Pan-Islam in British Indian Politics: A Study of the Khilafat Movement, 1918-1924* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1999).

Partition, Pakistan, and the Status of Muslims

In the years following the collapse of the Khilafat movement, debates leading up to Partition and the creation of Pakistan reveal the transformation of previous understandings about how Indian Muslims belong to India as a national, cultural, and social entity. Muslims themselves were not in agreement on the matter of belonging to their community, the Indian state, or to the Pakistan project.²⁵ The concept of the “two-nation” theory only fully gained coherence, and thus rhetorical force, in the context of planning for the end of British rule. This idea evolved gradually from simply official protections for Muslims, to zones of Muslim political and civic autonomy within an independent India, to eventually calls for a new homeland for Muslims. Mohammad Ali Jinnah’s speech that became the Lahore Resolution of 1940 was an early and official claim that the Muslims of South Asia were in fact a separate minority that compromised a “nation.” Muslims had every reason to doubt that they would be protected by Hindu leaders in an independent India, Jinnah argued.²⁶ He chided those who called for political unity between Hindus and Muslims, claiming that they fail to understand the “real nature” of the two religious communities:

They are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but are, in fact, different and distinct social orders. It is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality, and this misconception of one Indian nation has gone far beyond the limits, and is the cause of most of our troubles, and will lead India to destruction, if we fail to revise our notions in time. The Hindus and the Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, and literature. They neither intermarry nor interdine together, and indeed they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their aspects on life and of life are different. It is quite clear that Hindus and *Mussalmans* derive their inspiration from

²⁵ In *Self and Sovereignty* (2000), Ayesha Jalal demonstrates a spectrum of Muslim attitudes on these questions using examples from Muslim politicians, literary figures, and religious authorities.

²⁶ “Presidential Address of M.A. Jinnah,” quoted in Mushirul Hasan, ed., *India’s Partition: Process, Strategy, and Mobilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.44-58; 56.

different sources of history. They have different epics, their heroes are different, and they have different episodes. Very often the hero of one is a foe of the other, and likewise, their victories and defeats overlap. To yoke together two such nations under a single State, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing discontent and the final destruction of any fabric that may be so built up for the government of such a States.²⁷

Jinnah's claims of multiple layers of social, cultural, mythical, and historical difference between Hindus and *Mussalmans* (Muslims) show how far the communal question had evolved, and with it, the argument of inherent Muslim separatism. At the conclusion of this address, Jinnah made clear what South Asian Muslims as a separate minority now required: “*Musalmans* are a nation according to any definition of a nation, and they must have their homelands, their territory, and their State (sic).”²⁸ The vast and varied ways in which Jinnah argued that India's Muslims compromised a separate community evolved to a new level in the claim that they required a nation separate from majority Hindus.

Despite Jinnah's claims about belonging, difference, and nation, there were many opposed to the demand for Pakistan. Gandhi remained steadfast in his opposition to the idea of Muslim separateness. In reaction to Jinnah's Lahore address, Gandhi rejects his claims that Muslims are an essentially different religious community:

He does not say some Hindus are bad; he says Hindus as such have nothing in common with Muslims. I make bold to say that he and those who think like him are rendering no service to Islam; they are misinterpreting the message inherent in the very word Islam...I should be failing in my duty, if I did not warn the Muslims of India against the untruth that is being propagated amongst them.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 57.

²⁹ Quoted in Hasan, ed., *India's Partition: Process, Strategy, and Mobilization* (1993), 71.

Indian Muslims were also divided on the question of a new Muslim state. While many ‘*ulama* affiliated with the Deoband seminary remained out of political affairs, those active in politics joined the Jamiat ‘Ulama-i Hind party, which distanced itself from the Pakistan issue.³⁰ The Indian political leader and icon of Muslim nationalism Abul Maulana Azad, as President of the Congress Party, gave an impassioned speech that rejected the two-nation agenda a few days prior to Jinnah’s remarks at Lahore in 1940. Speaking at the fifty-third session of the party’s national gathering, Azad declared that he is proud to be both a *Musalman* and an Indian, and that his religious faith does not conflict with his national pride. His description of how the Muslims of India understand their relationship to the majority society is remarkably different from what Jinnah maintained: “I am a part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality. I am indispensable to this noble edifice, and without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete. I am an essential element which has gone to build India. I can never surrender this claim.”³¹ Islam, Azad continued, found a fertile home in the subcontinent eleven centuries earlier, bringing with it a message of democracy and equality. “Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism. If Hinduism has been the religion of the people here for several thousands of years, Islam also has been their religion for a thousand years. Just as a Hindu can say with pride that he is an Indian and follows Hinduism, so also we can say with equal pride that we are Indians and follow Islam.” This speech, a classic statement of the Indian Muslim nationalist position, is

³⁰ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, xi.

³¹ *Congress Presidential Addresses, Volume Five: 1940-1985*, ed. by A. M. Zaidi (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Applied Political Research, 1985), pps. 17-38.

notable for its unequivocal claims of the indispensable role that Muslims have in relation to the greater nation. It also expresses a Muslim desire to remain in India, which many still considered to be their homeland. The diversity of voices reveals that Muslims as a community were ambivalent regarding the matter of separatism and the territorial demand for Pakistan.

While in theory, colonial-era debates about Pakistan and Indian Muslim belonging pertained to Muslims throughout India, Muslim migration largely occurred in the north, particularly Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. In addition, the areas of Kashmir, Bihar, Bengal, and Hyderabad were affected, not uniformly, by the social and economic dislocations of Partition.³² The choice to remain in India or leave for Pakistan was a complex and personal decision, as well as a reaction to social circumstances which changed over time. As several studies indicate, the planning for Pakistan was vague, even up until 1947; the borders of the new nation were unclear, as well as how Muslims spread throughout the subcontinent would be newly assembled onto its territory.³³ Muslim confusion in Delhi about their status, along with growing violence, caused them to leave properties and seek refuge in the main camp at Purana Qila, a late sixteenth-century red sandstone fort near the center of the city. Many left, however, with the expectation that they would be able to return when the atmosphere improved.³⁴

³² Indian Muslims in the south and western regions were not as directly affected by these developments as compared to populations in the north.

³³ In Urdu literature on Partition, Sa'adat Hasan Manto's short story *Toba Tek Singh* poignantly revels in the confusion over boundaries and the absurd logics of Partition. See Manto, "Toba Tek Singh," Khalid Hasan, trans., in Mushirul Hasan, ed., *India's Partition: Process, Strategy, and Mobilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), pps. 396-402.

³⁴ Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 139.

Recent studies of Partition and its consequences reveal the Indian state's new and swift ideological stance as it actively intervened in the occupation of Muslim homes in Delhi. Faced with an influx of refugees from Karachi and Lahore, officials in Delhi enacted programs that forced the displacement of Muslims and allotted homes considered vacant to these peoples. Maulana Azad publicly defended Muslims in Delhi who made the hasty choice to flee their homes in a state of fear; he asked them to be patient, contending that these tough times would pass.³⁵ Gandhi, visiting the Muslims hiding at Purana Qila on September 13th, 1947, called on the Indian government to assist because these Muslims were "our" (Indian) citizens, if they had intentions to stay.³⁶ Nearly four months later, the deteriorating conditions in the camps and political stall in Karachi and Delhi pushed Gandhi to go on another hunger strike. The situation for north Indian Muslims who chose to remain in their homes was at once bewildering, violent, and fearful. Partition's violence resulted in the displacement of around twenty million people, the deaths of around one million, with no way to account for the numbers of women raped, injured, and forced to their deaths by those invoking so-called honor codes.³⁷ In other north Indian cities with significant Muslim populations, such as Lucknow and Agra, violence and displacement occurred but on a different scale than in Delhi and the Punjab. Lucknow was declared a riot zone several times between 1946 and 1950. Ultimately however, it was never feasible, nor desirable,

³⁵ Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 38.

³⁶ Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 140.

³⁷ The statistic on displacement is quoted in Zamindar, *The Long Partition*, 6.

nor possible for all of the Muslims living in British India to relocate to Pakistan in the years after independence. Those who chose to remain in India faced, and continue to confront, questions about their place in Indian society after Partition.³⁸

Muslims as a Minority in Independent India

Developments in independent Indian legal and social spheres complicate the question of Muslim belonging by revealing how the new state regards its mandate to protect the legal, social, and religious rights of its largest minority community. A controversial legal case over a divorced Muslim woman's right to receive maintenance payments from her former spouse put the legal autonomy of Indian Muslims into question when the Indian state intervened and negated the prescriptions of Muslim personal law. In 1985, Shah Bano's legal case against her ex-husband's refusal to pay a monthly maintenance was heard by the Supreme Court of India. While Muslim personal law does not grant divorced Muslim women renumerations other than the amount of their dowry (*mehr*) at the time of marriage, Article 125 of the Indian criminal code was one of several injunctions cited by the Court in their decision to award Shah Bano with continued payments.³⁹ The decision produced a debate over the rights of Muslims as a minority to retain

³⁸ A problem in the academic literature on Partition is that it is dominated by the experiences and memories of political elites (Zamindar's work is an important exception). Cinema and literature make up for this bias in poignant and necessary ways. Several new initiatives to recover a broader oral history through individual stories of Partition are worthy of mention. See "The 1947 Partition Archive" at URL: <http://www.1947partitionarchive.org/>, and "Indian Memory Project," at URL: <http://www.indianmemoryproject.com/>.

³⁹ For more on the discourse surrounding the case, and its implications for Muslims as a minority, see Peter J. Awn, "Indian Islam: The Shah Bano Affair," in John Stratton Hawley, ed., *Fundamentalism and Gender* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pps. 63-78.

special legal privileges, and the interests of the state to impose uniform legal identities on all Indian citizens. Muslim women were thrown into the middle of a complicated dispute concerning the interests of the state, their community, and patriarchial attitudes about women's rights.⁴⁰ Muslims who criticized the court's decision were suspected of not wanting to integrate into national legal and civic life, and their loyalties to Islam were judged as antagonistic to their fidelity to India.

Nearly fifty years after Partition, the destruction of the mosque at the Babri Masjid / Ram Janam Bhoomi temple in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh in 1992 is a seminal post-independence moment in regards to the status of Muslim belonging in Indian social history. The events surrounding this violence had serious consequences for India's Muslims.⁴¹ The site had seen communal incidents over many years, but in late 1992 efforts organized by extreme Hindu nationalist groups to destroy the sixteenth-century mosque culminated in the violent demolition of the building on December 6th of that year. This event provoked reprisals on a national scale, and Muslims were often targeted in that violence, such as the 2002 riots in Gujarat in which it is estimated that two-thousand five hundred Muslims were killed.⁴² The extreme politicization of

⁴⁰ See Zoya Hasan, "Muslim Women and the Debate on Legal Reforms," in Bharati Ray and Aparna Basu, eds., *From Independence Towards Freedom: Indian Women Since 1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pps. 120-134.

⁴¹ See the essays in David Ludden, ed., *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) for more on the mobilizations, histories, and interpretations of Indian social life tied to this event.

⁴² Christophe Jaffrelot, "Communal Riots in Gujarat: The State at Risk?" *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics* 17 (July 2003), pps. 1-20.

Hindu nationalist groups and their targeted violence against Muslims again called into question how Indian Muslims belong to the nation, as well as the commitments of the secular state, to protecting the rights of India's largest religious minority.

The 2006 Sachar Report, authored by former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court Justice Rajindar Sachar and based on his committee's findings, presented sobering details on the state of India's Muslims today. The Committee had been charged with detailing the conditions for Muslims in India and suggesting ways to alleviate their poor socio-economic and educational situations. Broadly, the Report argues that Muslims face problems related to identity, security, and equity. According to the author, Muslims in India today carry a "double burden" of being labeled "anti-national" and as being "appeased" at the same time. They continue to face "a great degree of suspicion not only by certain sections of society but also by public institutions and governance structures."⁴³ Social discrimination based on visible markers of Muslim identities—such as the headscarf, or a skullcap for men—is rampant and subjects Muslims to public ridicule. Equal access to education, and options beyond the ghettoized space of *madrassas* (theological schools) continue to plague the community.⁴⁴ Social boycott of Muslims is a standard practice in the housing and employment spheres; Muslims are often denied consideration for rental contracts and job applications simply because of their faith.⁴⁵ The Report indicted the Indian state's

⁴³ *High Level Committee Report on the Social, Economic, and Educational Status of the Muslim Community of India*, November 2006 (Delhi: Akalank Publications, 2007), 11.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

“obsessive” focus on select cases of Muslim women who have suffered the consequences of “Islamic” practices which, in effect, “allows the State to shift the blame to the Community and to absolve itself of neglect” in cases of social injustice.⁴⁶ While these findings prompted the Congress-led UPA government to create a Ministry for Minority Affairs, both that institution and the suggestions in the Report have been debilitated by accusations of pandering to minorities in exchange for political favors.

The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001 impacted Muslim social life on a global scale. This event, and the public response, influenced assumptions that connect Muslims everywhere, including in South Asia, to violence and terrorism. The attacks on the Taj Mahal Hotel and several other sites in Mumbai in October 2008 are often described as “India’s 9/11.” That a Pakistani Muslim extremist group took responsibility for the violence only heightened public suspicion of Indian Muslims.⁴⁷ Muslim relationships to terrorism, questions about what role(s) Islam as a faith commitment and doctrine plays for Muslims that justify such violence, and skepticism of the Muslim commitment to secular Indian values are all historically produced discourses that inflect the content and reception of contemporary Muslim performance. Rhetoric about how Indian Muslims do and do not relate to international and local events of violence is explored and debated in situations of Muslim representation. The discourse of how Muslims are associated with, or reject as anti-Islamic, episodes of violence is now global in

⁴⁶ Ibid., 12-13.

⁴⁷ Stephen Tankel, *Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-e Taiba* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 207-221.

character, and this is also the case in various performance contexts.

The nature of Muslim relationships to Indian society becomes a matter of national concern in the late-colonial debates on Muslim separatism and in the events of Partition. Diverse responses to elite political arguments that Muslims are a distinct community whose existence required a territory separate from India show that not all Muslims agreed with this conclusion. Moments of recent social violence cast doubts on the ability of the Indian state to protect Muslims targeted by extremist groups, and the Sarchar Report details Muslim disenfranchisement by both the state and Indian society. The argument that Muslims are not also Indians relies on the thesis of inherent Muslim communalism. Communalism is a contested category of historical and social analysis, and its origins as well as its validity for explaining the realities of Indian Muslim social life are subject to scholarly debate.

III: Indian Muslim Identity and Belonging in Scholarship: Debates on Communalism

The question of Muslim belonging became significantly politicized within the discourse on communalism in the modern period.⁴⁸ The extent to which British colonial authority produced and exacerbated existing communal sentiments is a major question for the historiography of

⁴⁸ In *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), Gyanendra Pandey defines communalism as a form of “colonialist knowledge” about how Indian society is organized, and as the social phenomenon of “suspicion, fear, and hostility between members of different religious communities” (6-7). That suspicion and fear is often defined by individual experiences, and then extrapolated to define an entire group and its motivations. Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s definition of communalism as “a political ideology that emphasized as the social, political, and economic unit the group of adherents of each religion, and has emphasized the distinction, even the antagonism, between such groups” identifies its application to a diverse set of interests. See Smith, *Modern Islam in India*, 157.

Muslim north India. Some studies point to social conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the pre-colonial period, such as public disputes over sacred sites and religious processions, as evidence of the pre-colonial history of communalism.⁴⁹ Institutions and regimes of social classification established by British colonial authority support the thesis of the colonial construction of communalism.⁵⁰ What is at stake in locating the origins of communalism is what it may reveal about the “inherent” nature of South Asian social life, and approaches to cultural and religious difference. If the responsibility for creating communalism lies with colonial authority, then a non-local source is to blame for its violent consequences. If communalism is a condition inherent to Indian social life, it follows that communal violence is fundamental to how Indians approach social, cultural, and religious difference.

Debate on the communal character of Indian society informs the question of inherent Muslim separatism. In the years following Partition, the literature on Muslim identities in South Asia was defined by studies of Indian Muslim history that emphasize or deny a historical and essential Muslim difference. Aziz Ahmad’s historical overview of Muslims in South Asia is driven by his thesis of a very long “divided co-existence” between Hindus and Muslims which

⁴⁹ C. A Bayly and Sandria Freitag argue that while public antagonism within north Indian religious communities originates in the pre-colonial period, describing social relations as “communal” is only applicable in describing late nineteenth and early twentieth-century society, when public expressions of religious difference had become markedly politicized. See Bayly, “The Prehistory of “Communalism”: Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860,” *Modern Asian Studies* 19:2 (1985), pps. 177-203, and Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*. Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 1989.

⁵⁰ Pandey’s discussion in *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (1992) is the major statement of this thesis of communalism’s origins.

resulted in “divided existence as India and Pakistan in the twentieth century.”⁵¹ He diagnoses separate typologies of conflict between the two cultures: Hinduism is assimilative and non-proselytizing, while Islam is insular, not at home in Vedic India, and over time retains its foreign character.⁵² Other historians contend that Indian Muslims hardly comprise a distinct nation since the only commonly-held allegiance is to their faith, and not to a Muslim homeland. Mohammad Mujeeb, for example, warns that the creation of Pakistan was a grave mistake.⁵³ Imtiaz Ahmad was one of the first scholars to define the Muslim relationship to non-Muslim Indian society as syncretic; he claims that Muslims held “theological and philosophical precepts and principles” with one hand and “local, syncretic elements” with the other.⁵⁴ While this literature consists of diverse arguments on the question of Muslim belonging, the fixation with origins is clearly in reaction to the events of Partition and the founding of Pakistan.

In conversation with historiography that emphasizes co-existence and syncretism, the thesis of Muslim separatism as a natural consequence of Islamic precepts supports arguments made by Jinnah regarding Muslim belonging, while undermining those made by Gandhi and Azad. Francis Robinson diagnoses Muslim elite separatism as a consequence of their understanding of Islamic doctrine and faith commitments. The distinctive, and separate, character of Muslims is evidenced for Robinson in aspects of prayer, language, and political

⁵¹ “Preface,” in Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, vii-xi.

⁵² Ibid., 74-75.

⁵³ Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, 561.

⁵⁴ Imtiaz Ahmad, *Ritual and Religion Among Muslims in India* (Delhi: Manohar, 1981), 14.

philosophy.⁵⁵ Farzana Shaikh argues that other Muslim sources of tradition, such as the role of *ijmā'* (consensus) and *ummah* (community) have informed and also limited Muslim politics more than historiography has acknowledged.⁵⁶ Paul Brass, in the main rejoinder to Robinson, argues that expressions of Muslim separatism are not inherent to the religion, but rather are elite manipulations of key symbols for socio-political purposes.⁵⁷

Generally, this line of argument accepts the premise of separate Hindu and Muslim social categories yet places blame for its construction on the colonial experience, which in ways unintended and strategic, produced communalism and Muslim sectarian responses. Initiatives of the colonial state created distinct categories of “Hindu” and “Muslim” that were invested with linguistic, political, and social consequences. Peter Hardy claims that colonial officials created communal sentiments when they instituted policies to recognize Muslims as a separate community through patronage schemes and political institutions. Immediately following the Mutiny in 1857, colonial officials carried out severely repressive policies towards upper class, *ashraf* Muslims. Later decisions to bring those very Muslims who the British had punished into greater participation in colonial institutions was an important step that served to bolster Muslim self-understanding as a privileged constituency.⁵⁸ Pandey indicts British authority with the

⁵⁵ Francis Robinson, “Islam and Muslim Separatism,” in David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp, eds., *Political Identity in South Asia* (Dublin: Curzon Press, 1979), pps. 78-112; 83-87.

⁵⁶ Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4.

⁵⁷ Paul Brass, “Elite Groups, Symbol Manipulation and Ethnic Identity Among Muslims of South Asia,” in David Taylor and Malcolm Yapp, eds., *Political Identity in South Asia* (London: Curzon Press; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), pps. 35-77.

⁵⁸ Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 116.

construction of communalism, defining it as a form of “colonialist knowledge” about how South Asian society is organized.⁵⁹ Ayesha Jalal’s scholarship on Muslim politics emphasizes the parity and interdependence of communal and nationalist politics, and thus provides an alternative orientation to move beyond the fixation with origins. She argues that the inclusionary character of the politics of secular nationalism produced the conditions for a particularistic communalism.⁶⁰

Scholarship on communalism and Muslim identity in India grew significantly in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁶¹ Many of these studies emerged as a response to the violence and destruction of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya in 1992. There is a concerted effort in this literature to move beyond claims of Muslim communalism and separatism to instead argue that Muslim participation in Indian society requires identity negotiation, and accommodating majority Hindu society. Another response to the communal and separatist characterization of Muslim identity is analysis that describes Muslim self-understanding as liminal, reflecting what is often described as “vernacular Islam.”⁶² While these studies evidence aspects of Muslim

⁵⁹ Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism*, 6.

⁶⁰ Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), 25.

⁶¹ See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds., *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000); and David Ludden, ed., *Making India Hindu* (1996).

⁶² Two studies that explore the in-between nature of Muslim identities are Dominique Sila-Khan, *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), and Joyce Flueckiger, *In Amma’s Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

participation in Indian society, they characterize that relationship as one in which Muslims adapt and acclimate to majority Hindu Indian culture.

This study addresses the tendency in secular historiography to represent Indian Muslims as separatist, sectarian, and communal, and other approaches that describe how Muslims belong (and do not) in terms of accommodation, adaptation, and conflict. Muslim voices in diverse contexts of performance reframe this literature by articulating their constitutive roles in national history, culture, and social life. Materials from historical and contemporary performance reveal the ways in which statements about the Muslim relationship to Indian society are constitutive, and not separatist, or sectarian, or in-between. While some representations in performance confirm the Muslim as national concern, others reveal political inspiration from Muslim histories, and a Muslim investment in the progress of the Indian nation. These performances are visions of Muslims *as* Indian.

IV: Indian Ideas of Secularism and Claims of Muslim Belonging

Performances that depict Muslim relationships to Indian society and culture participate in the discourse on secularism in modern India. One way that they comment on the role of religion to the state and the nation is in representations of Muslim values as ethical action and social justice, which inform personal conceptions of citizenship. Secularism assumes social unity; thus it is the opposite of communalism's thesis of social division. The concept of secularism in Indian critical theory is expansive and involves a complex set of variables, including state interests, identity politics, and the Indian's state's constitutional mandate to protect the rights of religious

communities. The term “secularism” first appeared in the Indian constitution in 1976, although the preamble to the 1950 constitution lays out the state’s secular approach as based in the concepts of freedom of religion, neutrality, and citizenship.⁶³ In Euro-American thought, secularism as an ideological approach calls for the separation of religious and state authority, relegating religion to the private sphere.⁶⁴ This is in contrast to the Indian state’s approach to secularism, which tasks the government with ensuring the protection of religious obligation. In practice this means that the state facilitates those activities and obligations deemed part of religious traditions, such as police protection for public religious processions, official state holidays on days of religious obligation, and the constitutional protection against offending the sentiment of religious communities.⁶⁵ How the Indian state understands its secular mandate produces a fundamental tension between the function of the state to mediate between universal rights informed by a liberal conception of citizenship, and the rights afforded to minority

⁶³ The definition of India as a “secular” and “socialist” state is part of the 42nd Amendment to the constitution, added during Indira Gandhi’s imposition of martial law during the Emergency. See Donald Eugene Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), for more on the conceptualization of Indian constitutional secularism. For comparison of Indian constitutional ideas of secularism with other national contexts such as Israel and the United States, see G.J. Jacobsohn, *The Wheel of Law: India’s Secularism in Comparative Constitutional Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁶⁴ For theorization on the public sphere as a space defined by rational-critical debate developed within capitalist modes of production, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into A category of Bourgeois Society*, Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, trans. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989). Talal Asad’s intervention in the historiography of secularism as a western concept notes its emergence in context of the capitalist nation-state. Thus, Asad argues, it must be analyzed as a historical category of social thought rather than religion’s rational successor. See Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). Charles Taylor details the development of the secular within European thought, wherein a new understanding of the human emerged as a rational, bounded, disengaged, and disciplined agent or, in Taylor’s conceptualization, as a “buffered” self. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 136.

⁶⁵ *Constitution of India*, K. Santhanam, introduction and notes (New Delhi: Hindustan Times, 1951).

religious communities.

In Indian critical thought, there are several ideological positions that define the terms and functions of secularism. In debates during the late British rule and the early years of independent India, two approaches emerged as the main positions on Indian secularism, and they continue to frame this discourse. One position, articulated by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, theorizes India's secularism as one in which the affairs of the state are not subject to the views of any religious community or ideology. This definition of the secular is not, he argues, a position in opposition to religion: "it is a state which honors all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities; that, as a state, it does not allow itself to be attached to one faith or religion, which then becomes the state religion."⁶⁶ The secular thesis developed by Nehru over time envisioned a state that would ensure the religious choice of its citizens. He maintained that it is government's role to guarantee "freedom of religion and conscience, including freedom for those who may have no religion."⁶⁷ The secular state here was to remain neutral in the matters of religion yet provide equal opportunity to all in the expression of faith. In this formulation, the terms of national belonging remain as citizens of a state first and foremost, with that state functioning as the neutral protector of all citizens' religious rights. Scholars have pointed out the flaws in this concept, both for the condescending nature of its stipulation of who tolerates who, and for the way that, despite its disavowal of the communal narrative for the nation's history, it

⁶⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru: An Anthology*. S. Gopal, Ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press: 1980), 330.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 327.

at the same time depends on primordial ideas of community and category for its bases of identification.⁶⁸

The other major position on Indian secularism is based on the concept of *sarva dharma sambhava*, often translated as equal respect for all religions. Although Gandhi did not articulate a clear stance on secularism, he often spoke about what he understood the role of religion is in national social life. He refuted the idea of neutrality in matters of religion and politics, maintaining that, “those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.”⁶⁹ The Gandhian approach inherently opposes state sponsored politics however, thus removing the state as arbiter in the religious and political matters of its citizens. More a mobilizing strategy than a specific doctrine, the implications of Gandhi’s thoughts for the statist project are difficult to specify due to his objections to that agenda. However, his approach differs from Nehru in that it emphasizes the religious commitment of citizens as they come together as a polity. This position argues that religion has an important role for the state because it is an essential source of values that determine social tolerance.

There is overlap between these two approaches which is essential to understanding how secularism is practiced in India today. Gandhi’s contention was that the state should treat all religions equally. Nehru argued that the state should not promote or uphold one religion over all

⁶⁸ See the essays in Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and Peter Morey and Alex Tickell, eds., *Alternative Indias: Writing, Nation, and Communalism* (New York: Rodopi, 2005) for these critiques.

⁶⁹ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993): 383.

others. Priya Kumar explains the difference as one of official neutrality in matters of religion: “a secular state is first understood in its minimal sense as a nontheocratic state. Yet Nehru goes further when he suggests that it is the obligation of the state to *honor all faiths equally*. Not only does such a state not favor any one religion but it also protects all religions (emphasis in original).”⁷⁰ The state’s mandate to protect all religions dictates that it must intervene in social and religious affairs, rather than relegating religion to a separate, private sphere. Some have questioned if the traditional distinction between public and private that informs many theories of secularism is appropriate for a South Asian context. Ashis Nandy argues that the cultural contexts within which classic theories of secularism were produced are important to how those ideas are practiced in other circumstances. He maintains that the separation of religion from public life is imported from nineteenth-century Europe, and therefore inadequately serves to define social life and mediate conflict in the Indian public sphere. Religion as faith is a local tradition influenced by values that serve to protect minority interests, such as hospitality, and tolerance.⁷¹

The rise of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics, starting in the 1980s, along with episodes of communal violence prompted the question of whether secularism as envisioned by Nehru was viable in the Indian context. Moments of significant communal violence like

⁷⁰ Priya Kumar, *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 23-24.

⁷¹ Ashis Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance,” in *Alternatives* 13:2 (1988), pp. 177-194.

Ayodhya in 1992 and Gujarat in 2002 were understood to comment on the state of secularism in Indian society.⁷² Is secularism in “crisis,” as declared by the titles of many books on the subject? Or does some “promise” remain in an Indian approach to the secularist project? The essays in Ludden, ed., examine this question and identify a widespread political restructuring which facilitated the resurgence of communal politics.⁷³ The end of the hegemony of the Congress Party opened up space for new political movements, many defined by a new style of leadership and a new approach to mass politics that Atul Kohli describes as competitive populism.⁷⁴ Studies of this event and its consequences further developed the definition of Indian secularism by examining its assumed failures. Pronouncements of the failure of secularism in moments of severe social intolerance of religious differences show that another definition of Indian secularism is to ensure inter-religious tolerance. An emphasis on tolerance is what Priya Kumar argues is the hallmark of Indian secularism as it is both constitutionally defined and theorized as multi-religious cohabitation.⁷⁵

Performances of Muslim experiences and histories comment on the assumptions of national belonging and social tolerance, and thus they participate in the genealogy of ideas on

⁷² In addition to the relevant scholarship previously mentioned, Mushirul Hasan argues that in a post-Babri Masjid era of renewed suspicions of Muslims as separatist, secular Indian Muslim intellectuals need to ensure that their voices are heard in the national discourse on communal conflict. See Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997).

⁷³ See David Ludden, “Introduction,” in David Ludden, ed., *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

⁷⁴ Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 17.

⁷⁵ Kumar, *Limiting Secularism*, 15.

Indian secularism. Like the concept of religion as faith, they revisit the separatist thesis between faith commitments and civic participation to show how religious sentiments inform personal ideas regarding national cooperation and minority belonging. Muslim histories are deployed in performance to both critique and affirm the assumptions of Nehruvian secularism, in particular the supposed unity between India's two largest religious communities, Hindus and Muslims. Defining secularism is often a matter of defining minority rights and the state's role to protect and ensure those claims. This is an approach wherein the state is at the center of the matter. Performance re-orientates this framework because it allows for Muslims to articulate their relationships to the Indian nation. These statements as a whole are inconsistent: the Muslim terrorist rejects any belonging to India, while other Muslims express their choice to participate in the idea of India as a national project. There is no single message that performances convey about the nature of Indian Muslim selfhood and belonging. As a form of representation, performance is inherently a shifting, ambiguous, and contested space of social action and expression.

V: Performance Makes Visible New Claims of Muslim Belonging

Spheres of cultural production such as literature, historiography, and the visual arts are complex sites of the negotiation of social identities. As an approach to examining social life, performance studies emphasizes the interdisciplinary exploration of social life as cultural production and evaluation, normativity and transgression, as well as mediation and resistance.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ In addition to the studies discussed, other important works in performance studies in English-language scholarship

Analyzing how Muslim identities are represented and evaluated in performative contexts brings attention to how embodiment inflects the message and reception of representation. Performance calls attention to the performed, the contested, and the scripted, in processes of representing Muslim identities. Using performance as a methodological category opens up analysis to a broad field of action and dialogue, driven by interactions between producers, consumers, and associated social discourse.

In performance studies, the relationship between representation, embodiment, and contesting the qualities of categories of social identity is theorized as processes of repeated signification. Judith Butler describes the “performativity” of identities as aspects of social reality which are not inherent or given, but rather are continually created as an illusion “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign.”⁷⁷ Butler’s theorization of the performed nature of identity shows how a category like the Indian Muslim is constructed and needs continuous signification through representation. She explains that this connotation occurs through the “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame.”⁷⁸ This “frame” of repeated significations consists of normative expectations

include Kenneth Burke’s model of communicative action and motivation in terms of drama, and Richard Schechner’s theorization of the dual functions of performance to entertain and edify. See Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1945), and Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory, 1970-1976* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977). The earliest work in South Asian languages on performance and drama is the the *Nātyaśāstra*, a second-century, Sanskrit commentary on the creation of drama and the technicalities of dramaturgy, gesture, expression. See Bharata Muni, *The Nātyaśāstra* (Calcutta: Manisha Granthalaya, 1967).

⁷⁷ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in Sue-Ellen Case, ed., *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pps. 270-282; 270.

⁷⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1990), 33.

of what qualities, behaviors, and dispositions constitute the category of the “Indian Muslim.” The normative structure which Butler describes as limiting the possibilities for signification is not universal, and subject to historical, geographical, linguistic, and individual contexts. In South Asian spheres of cultural production, the category of Muslim has been connoted differently, over time and in different contexts, in terms of how it maps onto (and does not) the category of Indian. Missing from Butler’s discussion of signification is how the performativity of the Indian Muslim is embedded in contexts such as space and place, which mediate the presentation and reception of identity.

Butler’s description of representation as performativity argues that the qualities used to define social categories can be contested, which requires enacting and then re-assigning meaning. Just as the performance of a subject is a matter of connotation, the processes of resistance and subversion of representation as also a matter of signification:

If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible.⁷⁹

If the qualities of a social identity require repeated definition through multiple acts of embodiment, re-signification is also how the interruption and transgression of identity is possible. The Indian Muslim identity is constructed in many areas of cultural and social life, including on the individual level, in cultural production, and in social discourse. In genres of performance, Muslims are represented using tropes and conventions that conform to predominant

⁷⁹ Ibid., 145.

expectations of their place in Indian social life. They are also depicted in ways that contest how they are understood in history and in social discourse. Performance through signification allows for producers to construct meanings of Muslim selfhood that both confirm, and interrupt, assumptions about Muslim belonging. The producers of Indian Muslims in performance are not also always Muslim, which invites comparison between representations generated by Muslims for Muslims, with those produced by others for a wider social audience.

Using performative language to analyze the role of gender in representations of Indian Muslims provides a method for identifying complex relationships between religion, culture, and the nation. Gender has been a key interpretive category in the study of representations of Islam and Muslims. From early Orientalist scholarship, to more recent studies of Muslim female piety as modern, gender is a central question in investigations of how representations of Muslim selves function both within and without the community.⁸⁰ Critical analysis of how gender is employed

⁸⁰ The study of gender and sexuality in Islamic studies is extensive. Key debates question the status of women in the early Muslim community, as in Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), and Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Another debated matter is the interpretation of Muslim women and gender roles in the Qur'an, discussed in Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford, England: Oneworld, 2006), and Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). The role of and possibilities for women in community prayer is discussed in Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), and Marion Katz, *Women in the Mosque: A History of Legal Thought and Social Practice* (Columbia University Press, 2014). Recent studies of Muslim gender and sexuality in terms of ritual piety include Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), and Karen Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, & Everyday Practice* (2011). Scott Kugle and Amanullah De Sondy examine homosexuality in Islam through the discourse of sexuality in Muslim traditions and attitudes. See Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010), and De Sondy, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* (London, England: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013). Lila Abu-Lughod is critical of contemporary feminist discourse that strives to "save" Muslim women from the hands of Muslim men and tradition due to its condescending cultural relativism and racist assumptions. See Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

in discussions of the relationship of Islam as a historical, religious, and cultural tradition complicates how “Islam” serves as a signifier in discourses on modernity and progress, and of cultural difference.

Processes of performing the self are both everyday, and part of the scripted nature of social relations. In contrast to highly stylized, staged presentations, the practice of common and basic exchanges shows how performance is also ordinary, and in some sense mundane. Erving Goffman interprets routine social interaction as elements of a dramatic performance that are constructed by individuals who cultivate their presentation as meant to be seen.⁸¹ His interpretation of basic social action as a scripted performance emphasizes analysis of that which is off-script, or backstage, in order to expose the assumptions governing social relations. While social life may be a performance, it should not be reduced to mere pretense. Rather, uncovering the constructed nature of interaction and expression reveals diverse realities, and the influence of multiple discourses on self-statement and presentation.

As shown in the earlier discussion of scholarship on communalism, materials from performance reframe how the question of Muslim belonging within Indian social life is explained as conflict, or adaptation, or accommodation. Performance allows for Muslims to represent and be represented in ways that contest and interrupt key assumptions about how they belong to Indian society and as they have been represented in historiography. Performance and the act of writing history are both sites of ideological representation, and they mediate each other

⁸¹ Erving Goffman, “Presentations,” in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), pps. 17-76.

to bring new perspectives on how the past and the present are known. Aparna Dharwadker has described the role that fictionalized historical representations play for Indian historiography as intertextual, and actively involved with how the past comes to be known in the present:

The historiographic text is not the only, or even the most important, site of ideological contestation: in colonial and postcolonial contexts, legitimized histories coexist and often collide with non-historiographic, overtly fictional forms of historical writing and performance that perform complex epistemological and cultural functions and intervene significantly in the discourse of history.

Performance is an active participant in the construction of national histories, despite its neglect in the literature on the cultural politics of producing Indian nationalism.⁸² In staged drama, performances at historical monuments, and in film, representations of Muslim histories and experiences serve multiple and diverse purposes: to promote Indian nationalism, to critique the assumptions of national unity, and to express an ethical disposition as part of Indian social life. The logic of Partition which questions if and how Muslims belong to India is contested in genres of performance, which document a historical and continuing Muslim contribution to Indian national history.

The study of performance in South Asian religious traditions examines how religious objects, texts and expressions are translated in the process of embodied presentation. For example, acts of dramatic re-enactment are shown to bring new interpretations to various Hindu

⁸² See Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Jisha Menon's *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), a study of mimesis in performances of Indian nationalism, is a recent exception.

traditions and folklore.⁸³ Themes such as religious duty and obligation (*dharma*), the ethics of social conflict, fidelity and assumptions about moral character which are developed in classic epic narratives including the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* take on new relevance in settings of presentation in India today.⁸⁴ In terms of research on Muslim traditions, studies of Shi'i Muslim devotional ritual, and of *qawwali* performances reveal the complex and inter-religious character of South Asian Islamic performance.⁸⁵ New contexts for performance are also defined as different genres of representation, which alters the content and reception of the materials being performed. Joyce Flueckiger's ethnography of Chhattisgarh folklore through performance draws attention to how the construction of genre shifts according to reception community.⁸⁶ Comparing the categories within which performances of religious experience occur reveals continuity in tropes of representation, and also exposes how genre limits acts of translation. This study expands the terrain of what is considered "performance" by bringing together for comparison diverse examples of Muslim representation in genres that include, and go beyond,

⁸³ See Richard Schechner, *Performative Circumstances, From the Avant Garde to Ramlila* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983), Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), and Susan Snow Wadley, *Raja Nal and the Goddess: The North Indian Epic Dhola in Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

⁸⁴ In a north Indian context, Philip Lutgendorf's study of performance traditions of Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas* in Banaras traces how an epic narrative that begins as a text takes new shape as it moves across genres of enactment and reception. See Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

⁸⁵ See Shemeem Burney Abbas, *Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices in Pakistan and India* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), and Regula Qureshi, *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context, and Meaning in Qawwali* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Selected literature on Shi'i Muslim ritual traditions is reviewed in Chapter two.

⁸⁶ Joyce Flueckiger, *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

devotional settings and religious histories. A comparative approach to the study of performance reveals continuities in representation, such as the concern for historical accuracy, and Muslim voices responding to how they are evaluated as not Indian. While some performances represent Muslims as Indians through their participation in movements for national progress, the messages of how Muslims belong in other performances are not as clear. The intentional and inadvertent ideas about Muslims that performances convey are also ideological, and are mediated by representations in history and social discourse.

VI: Identity / Representation / Experience

In this study, the term “identity” denotes claims made in performance about the qualities of Muslimness, rather than a stable category of historical and contemporary experience. Recent critiques of the usefulness of identity as a category of analysis, like that of Cooper and Brubaker, argue that in ethnography and historiography, several different trends of expression and presentation are flattened by the use of identity as a single unit of classification.⁸⁷ Identity remains a useful descriptor for statements about what characterizes Muslim dispositions and experiences, however it is essential to point out the diversities in what is being claimed and who is doing the claim-making. To speak of a monolithic Muslim identity in Indian culture betrays the diversities of that community in terms of language, socio-economic status, generational attitudes, and geographic location. Just because a performer is Muslim does not mean that they

⁸⁷ Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, “Identity,” in Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pps. 59-90.

intend for their work to intervene in discourses of Muslim belonging and social justice in India today. Yet, both Muslim and non-Muslim producers of the performance pieces included in this study have expressed their intentions in their work and practices, and these objectives are analyzed in comparison with content and representational strategies. The exciting aspect of studying performance is its trans-ideological potential, in so far as these moments may serve to reinforce rather than to question established attitudes about Muslims.⁸⁸ Therefore, the following analysis of the social messages of performance attends to both the potentials and pitfalls of the content and strategies of Muslim representations. This study does not intend to redefine the Indian Muslim as a category of historical and contemporary experience; instead, it reveals how diverse claims made about this community in performance reveal incongruities in how they are defined in terms of belonging to Indian society.

VII: Orientalism and Representation in Performing Muslims

Postcolonial studies emphasizes critical examination of the complex frameworks and content of representation. In his *Orientalism*, Edward Said identifies a colonialist discourse about the “Orient” that informs distorted representations of historical subjects.⁸⁹ The ideological nature

⁸⁸ In her study of irony and humor, Linda Hutcheon discusses their transideological potential to both serve and undercut progressive agendas. See Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 10.

⁸⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). For more on the tropes and conventions of European orientalist representations of India in particular, see Linda Hutcheon, “Orientalist Constructions of India,” in *Modern Asian Studies* 20 (1986), pps. 401-461, and Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

of representation is not limited to social relations in colonial contexts, however. The nature of representing a subject is part of discourses of authority, and often sends an ambivalent message.

The orientalist construction of “Muslim” as an identity category defines this subject in incongruous ways; Muslims are invaders foreign to the territories they rule, and at the same time they are effeminate, ineffectual hedonists. Said argues that the act of representation should not be evaluated in terms of its claims to verify reality, but rather in terms of what he describes as “exteriority.”⁹⁰ To do so is to focus on the tropes, practices, and devices of representation, which as Said notes, will have more meaningful associations for the culture of producers than with the culture of the subject being presented.

The process of representing the Indian Muslim is characterized by external symbols which render them exotic and unusual, and distance them from “mainstream” belonging. Shahid Amin argues that the tropes of representing Muslims in contemporary Indian cultural, social, and political discourse serve to “constitute the stability of the category of “Muslim” as “other.”⁹¹ The conventions of how Muslims are represented visually in Indian culture include the assumed external markers of Muslim identity: for men, a grown beard and a skullcap, and for women, a headscarf and long black garment worn when in public. Muslims are not the only Indian social group subject to biased conventions and tropes in visual representations. However, the complex

⁹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 28.

⁹¹ Shahid Amin, “Representing the Musalman: Then and Now, Now and Then,” in Shail Mayaram et al., eds, *Subaltern Studies XII: Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrication of History* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), pps. 1-35; 6.

frameworks that define them as not Indian means that the ways in which they are presented, and represent themselves, should be evaluated in light of the ideologies of identity and national community that construct their being.

The ideological messages of representation are also influenced by the perspectives of producers. Performances in Delhi and Lucknow are often produced (and also consumed) by those in upper socio-economic classes and elite social circles. Many performances are based on the histories of Muslim elites, and often in situations of political rule. These representations are also usually set in a Muslim past, thus rendering Muslim subjects as separate using time and distance. I speculate more on what this temporality may mean for understanding Muslim performances in the conclusion. The locations of performance are another mediating factor in terms of content and evaluation. The Indian Muslim experience is defined in multiple ways, and region is one aspect that influences Muslim representation. A Muslim in south India, for example, was less likely to be as impacted by the shifts in politics, social life, and the idea of home that are all consequences of Partition. Comparison of the assumptions of producers, based on diverse factors like class, region, and political leanings, with the content and messages of performance reveal how these attitudes both determine and restrict the possibilities of Muslim representation.

VIII: Genres of Performance: Form, Space, Event

Muslim representation in Indian performance genres is analyzed in this study using several methodological approaches: historiographical and literary analysis of published plays,

ethnography of contemporary performances, and textual and visual analysis of Bombay cinema. The examples of performance include a diverse range of media and cultural forms, from cinema to drama and ritual action. Performance as an interpretive category includes diverse practices of embodiment and representation, which are mediated by processes of presentation, the choices of producers, and relevant social discourse.

A play published at a time of high nationalist sentiment in north India symbolizes a moment when a vision for Indian social unity was articulated by a Hindu author representing a sacred Shi'i Muslim history. Munshi Premchand's drama *Karbala* (1924) is a retelling of the battle of Karbala (680 CE), in which Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and his supporters were martyred in a conflict over leadership of the early Muslim community. The play was published first as a stand-alone text in Hindi and serialized in the Urdu magazine *Zamana* based in Kanpur, United Provinces (today Uttar Pradesh). To date, there is no record of the play ever being performed. Premchand's *Karbala* is unique because it develops a new story line based on a historical legend of Hindu assistance in the Shi'i Muslim fight for justice. As evidenced from personal correspondence, Premchand's intentions for this drama were political: it was to be a vehicle for promoting unity between Hindus and Muslims to serve the nationalist movement. He was convinced that if Hindus came to know of the moral and ethical actions of Husayn, they would be inspired to join Muslims and act against British imperialism for the sake of an independent India.

Muslim voices in *Karbala* articulate their fidelity to Hindu characters who join them in their battle against injustice and cruelty. Hindus, inspired by the ethical actions of Muslims,

assert that their faith mandates that they join this Muslim cause; Muslims, recognizing this sacrifice, include these Hindus within the realm of Islam. Premchand's choice of characterization in *Karbala* gives Muslims an essential role in social unity, and his political agenda with the play indicates that Muslim participation is necessary to the future of an independent India.

Comparison with a drama also based on an Indian Muslim past reveals how Muslim histories serve as sites of complex contestation, used to both critique and champion the assumptions of the nationalist project and secular unity. In *Karbala*, Premchand uses historical fiction to represent Islamic histories as symbolic of, if not integral to, Indian history.

Religious ritual expression is a form of performance that reveals how Muslim voices articulate the terms of their relationships to the Indian nation. Ritualized performances of Muslim identities occur in context of Shi'i womens' gatherings in Lucknow during the month of Muharram, called the *ghar ki majlis*. In this setting, women join together in their homes to remember the stories of the martyrs of the seventh-century Karbala event. During a *majlis*, participants recite elegiac Urdu poetry (*nauha*), listen to lectures delivered by orators (*zakir/a*), recall the paradigmatic stories of ethical sacrifice, and reinterpret this history for guidance in the present.

These devotional performances are more than simply ritualized weeping and mourning, however. Participants evaluate how others convey sincerity through a register of emotional responses, including shedding tears, chest beating (*matam*), and a somber tone in poetic recitation. In the *ghar ki majlis*, participants learn about Shi'i histories, and are socialized in proper etiquette (*adab*) and in ethical Shi'ism, or as Shi'is in Lucknow describe, being

“Husayni.” This model of Muslim selfhood is defined as an ethic of sacrifice, as one who works for social justice, and as being a patriotic citizen of India. Shi’i men and women in Lucknow articulate how the ethics of being Husayni informs their identities as Muslims, and as Indians. These Muslim voices describe how the tenets of ethical Shi’ism as expressed in the *majlis* emphasize citizenship and national participation. The Karbala narrative of sacrifice and social justice provides an ethical blueprint for acting in the world, and has inspired both Muslims and non-Muslims to connect these morals to social unity and the progress of the nation.

Two current examples of performance in Delhi feature the voices of past Muslim rulers who return to the present in order to respond to how history and contemporary society has questioned their ethics and their belonging to India. Heritage tourism is a form of performing pre-modern Indian Muslim histories in which new meanings related to the past and present are constructed within the monumental spaces where this tourism occurs. Darwesh is a Delhi-based organization that promotes experiential learning through tours of various historical sites around the city. Their heritage performance walk called “The Mad Genius” is based on the life of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the early fourteenth-century Muslim ruler of Delhi. The walk combines a presentation of historical detail with a theatrical performance, within the ruins of the crumbling forts and tombs built during the years of Muslim rule in north India. Producers guide participants in the historic Janahpanah fort, present their historical narrative, and an actor performing Tughlaq emerges to respond to how he is represented as an eccentric, but enlightened, Muslim king. The walk ends with questions and feedback for the guide, and occasionally some revisions to what was just presented. Heritage walks are a dynamic site of analysis because in one place

and at one time, producers and consumers interact and dialogue about historical accuracy and choices in representation.

Examining the question of Muslim belonging in context of performances at neglected monuments reveals how this discourse operates in the ideological construction of space and place in Delhi today. This walk and theatrical presentation gives Tughlaq, a complicated figure in both Indian historiography and in performance, a voice to respond to how he is commonly depicted as an enlightened despot. He defends the ethics of his decisions in regards to his identity as a Muslim and ruler over a mixed Hindu and Muslim population. Tughlaq provides an explanation for the immoral actions taken in order to preserve his authority. Analysis of the prepared walk text, combined with ethnographic observations from the performance and audience discussion and critique, reveal an inconsistent message about the moral and mental disposition of this Muslim ruler.

Staged historical drama is a method of performing north Indian Muslim pasts with a long history in Indian theatre that remains popular with audiences in Delhi today. *Sons of Babur* is an Urdu drama written by Salman Khurshid which is produced by M. Sayeed Alam of the Delhi-based Pierrot's Troupe. The play's title references a popular slur directed at Indian Muslims; they are the progeny of Babur, a Muslim "invader" born outside of India who later came to rule and establish the Mughal Empire. It suggests that Indian Muslims today are also foreigners, who should return to the place from which they ostensibly came. The message of the play is that the socio-political idea of India (Hindustān) was important to the Muslim Mughals who ruled north India for nearly four hundred years, so to suggest that Indian Muslims today are strangers

completely ignores historical “facts.” The play is performed regularly in major Indian cities and has been staged internationally. As a participant-observer during rehearsals, I was cast in a minor role as an Indian-American woman in the play, and performed with the Troupe in several shows in Delhi and Bombay.⁹² Ethnographic analysis includes interviews with actors, reflections on my own experience acting in the play, interviews with Alam and Khurshid, and anecdotes from audiences.

Muslim voices in *Sons of Babur* articulate the terms of their belonging to Hindustān as elites who chose to remain in north India after Babur arrived in the mid-sixteenth-century. Babur’s ruling heirs declare that the facts of their ancestry are further proof that these Muslims are not foreign, but are very much Indian. Proving Mughal fidelity also requires them to defend their commitments to Islam in light of their charge to rule over a majority Hindu society. An ethics of Muslim rule emerges in statements about what is and is not part of “Islam,” and whether political actions were taken because of religious ideological obligation, or for the sake of a mixed Hindu and Muslim medieval society.

Cinema as a form of Indian representation is particularly invested in the fictive unity of the nation, and Muslims have long been a part of this industry—both in front and behind the camera. Muslim performances in post-independence Bombay commercial and art films are thus regularly constructed in terms of their belonging (or not) to national social life. A typology of the performance of Muslim characters in film includes the aristocratic Muslim, the violent separatist

⁹² I received no remuneration for my participation in the play, and during fieldwork performed with the Troupe twice in Delhi, and once in Bombay.

Muslim, and the voice of ethical action in a post-9/11 global context of terrorism and social justice. A theme in Muslim representation in cinema returns to the event of Partition and the consequences for Indian Muslims who did not leave for Pakistan. These films explore Muslim disenfranchisement, social humiliation, and economic discrimination as a result of new assumptions about Muslim belonging and commitments.

Garm Hava (Hot Wind, 1973), was the first film to forefront the voices of Muslims who stayed in India after Partition. Directed by M.S. Sathyu, the story follows the gradual partitioning of the family of Salim Mirza, a shoe manufacturing owner in Agra, Uttar Pradesh. The film begins with Salim at the train station, waving goodbye to his sister as she leaves India for Pakistan. The plot of *Garm Hava* is driven by the successive departures of members of the family and in doing so reveals the anguish and emotions of the choice to remain in India. It discloses cleavages defined by gender, generation, and socio-economic status that rendered the question of whether to stay or to leave different for every Muslim who faced this predicament. Salim Mirza's resistance to the idea of Pakistan is often read as refusing to leave, when it is just as much of a choice to remain in India. His is a Muslim voice that chooses India over and over again, despite the challenging and discriminating post-Partition circumstances. Analysis of the film text, interviews with Sathyu and other producers, and reviews in print media and online sources reveal how choices made in production influence the radical potential of the film to voice Muslim grievances defined by the new logic of Partition.

This interdisciplinary study of historical and contemporary Muslim voices in diverse cultural genres emphasizes the role of performance in studies of social change and identity

construction, yet focuses on how these processes are fluid, contested, and part of social contexts larger than the performance text or event itself. In the chapters that follow I show how the practice of performing Muslim selves across genres involves differing modes of translation, and is potentially undercut by the ideological goals and assumptions of producers and reception communities. Muslim voices in these contexts of performance articulate their fidelity to and belonging in Indian history, culture, and social life. They assert how their identities as Muslims are not in conflict with also being Indian, and that they have an essential role in the progress of the Indian nation. Muslims describe their relationships with Hindus in ways that are unifying, and not separatist or sectarian. By detailing how a religious community responds to how they are negatively defined in diverse performances driven by debate on their national and social belonging, “Indian Muslims in Performance” restores the place of diverse Muslim voices and their articulations of Muslim participation in north Indian culture and historical memory.

Chapter One

Munshi Premchand's *Karbala*: Ethics, Obligation, and Islamic History as Indian History

*I also pray to God that whenever Islam needs our blood,
there is no shortage in our community of those who will sacrifice themselves for the cause.
Now we request permission to go to the battlefield.
In defense of truth we will sacrifice our lives.*¹

The Hindu Sahas Rai declaring his fidelity to Husayn, in a scene from Premchand's *Karbala*

Introduction: Premchand's *Karbala*

The development of the nationalist movement for independence from Britain, along with increasingly communal social relations along the boundaries of religious community, characterize the politicized climate of late colonial north India. Hindus joining with Muslims and others in support of the Khilafat movement seemed to be a reprieve from increasing social, religious, and political tension. The gradual failure of this initiative between 1922 and 1924 symbolized for many the last hope for inter-religious cooperation in support of the emerging nationalist cause. Confidence that north Indian Hindus and Muslims could set aside their differences and grievances to unite politically, at this point in time, had been significantly diminished by these international and local events.

Despite growing skepticism, belief that Hindus and Muslims would cooperate for the sake of independent India remain alive in *Karbala*, a 1924 drama based on a sacred Muslim history. Written by Munshi Premchand, a prolific author in Urdu and Hindi and a supporter of the nationalist movement, *Karbala* is a telling of the seventh-century battle at Karbala between Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and his rivals over leadership of the young

¹ Munshi Premchand, *Karbala*. Introduction by Veena Agarwal (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2007), 13. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the play are my own.

Muslim community. As evidenced from personal correspondence, Premchand's intentions for this drama were political: it was to be a vehicle for promoting Hindu and Muslim cooperation through encouraging non-Muslims to recognize the ethical example set by a Muslim past. In his preface to the play, Premchand explains his belief that ignorance of the moral nature of Muslim historical figures (such as Husayn) is at the heart of the socio-religious conflict in his present:

It is a shame that although we have been living with Muslims for centuries we are ignorant of their past histories. This is the reason for discord between the two communities. We are not aware of the good qualities inherent in the great men of the Muslim community. When we think of a Muslim king, the only image that comes to mind is that of Aurangzeb. Good people and bad people are present in every age, and this will be the case forever.²

In *Karbala*, Premchand translates a seventh-century religious history for a twentieth-century political cause. The creation, content, and critical reception of the play reveal the possibilities and problems in translation, the role of history in historical drama, and assumptions about authorship and religious identity. In his version of this sacred history, Premchand develops a new story line based on a historical legend of Hindu assistance in the Shi'i Muslim fight for justice. In several scenes, Hindus and Muslims articulate how their religious commitments obligate them to cooperate together on a seventh-century battlefield. Muslim voices in *Karbala* articulate how the terms of their respect for and obligation towards Hindus are mandated by the principles of their Islamic faith. Muslim characters on a medieval battlefield recognize Hindus as their partners in protecting a young Muslim community. Premchand intended for the play to intervene in his political present, and his representation of Muslim characters is an argument about their importance in the nationalist movement, and the building of the independent Indian nation.

Karbala reveals a moment from north Indian religious, literary, and political history

² Munshi Premchand, *Karbala* (Nayī Dillī: Sarasvatī Press, 1958), pg 1-2.

when a Muslim sacred history provided ethical inspiration for a political, anti-imperialist agenda. Comparison with other dramatic representations of Indian Muslim histories makes clear how these materials participate in the construction of alternative histories, acting as an intertext between Indian historiography and the act of dramatic representation. Set within the broader political context of a nationalist presentation of Hinduism as the religion of the nation, *Karbala* is part of a dramatic alternative that uses historical fiction to instead present Islamic histories as symbolic of, if not integral to, Indian history.

I: The Contexts for *Karbala* in 1920s North India

In the late colonial period in north India, social divisions which mapped diverse aspects of identity onto singular and oppositional religious communities gradually became more defined, and the boundaries less porous. At least on the elite level of politics, many Hindus and Muslims understood that they were two communities that had separate and inherently different political and social requirements. Part of this discourse was a debate over the relationship between religious identity, citizenship, and language. The argument that Hindus and Muslims had different social requirements was transposed onto a debate over what the national language of a free India should be: Hindi, Urdu, or Hindustani. As many scholars of this period have shown, the strict correlation of language and community was a fluid issue in north India until the 1860s, when the British colonial educational apparatus reshaped language as a marker of religious community, and aligned these distinctions onto employment prospects in the colony.³ While these correlations between faith and language pre-existed the formative years of the nationalist movement, their significance was amplified in that political discourse.

³ Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, 104.

Nationalist thinkers of this time, including Premchand, debated the argument that language was a signifier of religious community. In a 1934 essay titled, “Urdu, Hindi, and Hindustani,” published in the Urdu magazine *Zamana*, Premchand advocated a national spoken and administrative language called “Hindustani” that would be stripped of the problematic vocabulary words from Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian that define and divide language as either “Hindi” or “Urdu.”⁴ In the essay, Premchand attempts to reframe the debate from a choice between either Hindi or Urdu to a compromise that would incorporate what was most mutually intelligible between both languages. This was a practical program that he thought was most appropriate for a society on the path to political freedom. Premchand was critical of those in this debate who were concerned with linguistic origins and etymology, because he felt these questions were superfluous to the immediate need to foster social unity through a new national language that transcended religious categories.⁵

The political tension that characterized the Punjab and United Provinces in the 1920s also emerged in the worlds of print and publishing. Publications in Urdu, once a primary language of north Indians, had been in decline as publishers responded to readers’ growing literacy in and preference for Hindi.⁶ Premchand also shifted from writing primarily in Urdu to Hindi; he never completely stopped writing in Urdu, however, and many of his works were translated and published in both languages.⁷ Publications from this time show how the politics of religion and

⁴ Madan Gopal and Rahil Sidiqqi, contributors, *Kulliyat-i Premchand*, 24 vols. (New Delhi: Qaumi Kaunsil bara’e Furogh-i Urdu Zaban, 2000), Vol. 21, 352.

⁵ Ibid., 352-355.

⁶ Harish Trivedi, “The Progress of Hindi, Part 2: Hindi and the Nation,” in Sheldon Pollock, ed., *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp 958-1002: 974-975.

⁷ Madan Gopal, *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography* (Bombay; New York: Asia Publishing House, 1964), 222.

national belonging found a new battleground in the world of print. Several polemic works questioned the moral and prophetic nature of the Prophet Muhammad. The most famous of these is probably *Rangeela Rasul (Colorful Prophet)*, a pamphlet published in Urdu in 1924 that depicts Muhammad as a lecherous, polygamous figure. The author, Pandit Champovati, reviews the several marriages of the Prophet in order to question his standing as a moral exemplar for Muslims. Muslim reactions to the contents of *Rangeela Rasul* generated legal proceedings against the publisher, Rajpal, in a Lahore court which acquitted him of all charges in 1927.⁸ Rajpal was assassinated in 1929.

Another example of is *Vichitra Jivan (Peculiar Life)*, a biographical study of the Prophet written by Pandit Kalicharan Sharma. Sharma, like the author of *Rangeela Rasul*, was an Arya Samaj leader. Published in Hindi first in 1923, the work begins with a discussion of pre-Islamic Arabia and then reviews the major events of Muhammad's life up to and including his death. Sharma's hope was that in reading his book, Muslims "might rid their hearts of senseless obstinacy, partiality, and blind religious faith, and instead should glimpse the truth" about who Muhammad really was.⁹ In his revisionist history, most controversial is Sharma's depiction of Muhammad as an epileptic whose experiences of receiving revelation were simply seizures. Sharma questions his moral character by suggesting that Muhammad possessed an extraordinary sexual nature, and that his marriages to his wives were inappropriate. This slanderous biography was constructed within the problems of Sharma's communal present, which he points out in clear terms: "history offers a witness that Islam was propagated by underhanded means, conspiracies,

⁸ Neeti Nair, "Beyond the 'Communal' 1920s: The Problem of Intention, Legislative Pragmatism and the Making of Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50, 3 (2013), pps. 317-340.

⁹ Gene R. Thursby, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in British India: A Study of Controversy, Conflict, and Communal Movements in Northern India 1923-1928* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 49.

and the help of the sword. A person who reads the newspapers knows that even today in India the same sort of means...encourage Muslims to massacre Hindus.”¹⁰

Events held in the public spaces of North India also mirrored these political developments.¹¹ Shi’i Muslim public religious processions, especially those part of the annual commemoration of Muharram, suddenly came under scrutiny. Extreme Hindu leaders publicly (mainly in print) criticized Hindus who participated in such events, because they argued that such involvement threatened the purity of the Hindu community.¹² To some Hindu elites, Hindu participation in a “Muslim” ritual was newly understood as political provocation in the 1910s and 1920s.

The emphasis that nationalists like Premchand gave to Hindu-Muslim unity addressed important practical concerns that served their political agenda. In context of the early Independence movement, cooperation between Hindus and Muslims served the need for a united front to fight against foreign imperialism. Indeed, it must be seen at one level as a reaction to the British disposition in colonial administration to “divide and rule”; following the 1857 Mutiny up to the moment of independence, Muslims and Hindus were alternately courted and ignored by British colonial interests.¹³ In his literary career, Premchand often dramatized relationships between the two dominant religious communities in north India in order to make a political

¹⁰ Quoted in Ibid., 50.

¹¹ Besides these incidents in north India, some Hindu leaders publically chastised Hindus who participated in Muharram rituals in what is today the state of Maharashtra. Shabnum Tejani details how some Brahmins in Pune called on Hindus to end their “infatuation” with Islam and stay out of Muharram commemorations. See Tejani, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, 1890-1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 56-60.

¹² Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 171-72.

¹³ Hardy, *The Muslims of British India*, 116.

statement about social belonging. Arguments conveyed in *Karbala* about Muslim ethics, as well as their role in projects of social unity, are part of a larger literary and political effort by Premchand that dominated his writing in the 1920s.

II: Hindu and Muslim Relationships in Premchand's Works

The 1920s mark a high point in Premchand's career, when he produced nearly one hundred pieces of fiction and non-fiction—plays, short stories, novels, and social commentaries. His writing from this time reveals the extent to which he was invested in the increasing violence between Hindus and Muslims, which by then had become a key concern for nationalists. Premchand's non-fiction advocacy essays are critical of Hindu skepticism of Muslim commitment to the nationalist effort. In his fictionalized depictions of north Indian social life, Hindus and Muslims are given a voice with which to advocate religious tolerance and mutual cooperation as necessary for Indian autonomy.

A common theme in Premchand's story lines and characterization is liberal and tolerant Hindu and Muslim characters repudiating their violent and prejudiced coreligionists. The 1925 story *Mandir aur Masjid* (*Temple and Mosque*) raises these issues through the relationship between a Muslim *zamindar* and his Rajput Hindu servant. The *zamindar*, Itrat Ali, rejects the violence between Hindus and Muslims, and thus is a model of liberal respect for all religious communities. When agitated Muslims attack a Hindu temple on a holy festival day, Ali's servant attempts to stop them; in the chaos he accidentally murders Ali's son-in-law. The police attempt to arrest the Hindu servant, but Ali defends him because he believes that he was provoked by the actions of Muslims. Later, the servant leads a group of Hindus to destroy the mosque and attack Muslims. Ali's tolerance for Hindu violence is further tested when the servant confesses to

leading the violent group. Ali questions his earlier defense of the Hindu and expresses his desire for murderous revenge; the servant is willing to be killed, but Ali maintains his enlightened tolerance and refuses to perpetuate the violence.

Another example, *Kāyākalpa* (*Rejuvenation*, 1924), is a short story set against the backdrop of North Indian communal violence. In this narrative both Hindu and Muslim characters enunciate Premchand's nationalist emphasis on unity for the sake of India. A Muslim character claims that, "it is only through unity that this nation will achieve its liberation." A Hindu character makes the same point more dramatically: "there is no way out of this for either the Hindus or the Muslims; the two have to live in this country and die in this country. Neither can swallow the other. The two should live in unity and peace."¹⁴ Set against his time in 1920s north India, Premchand's writings respond to the problems of violence between religious communities through his clear advocacy of tolerance and mutual respect. In this work, he emerges as a consistent promoter of Hindu and Muslim political unity in a Hindi-Urdu literary sphere.

Premchand's published journalism from this time is focused on political developments in North India and is steadfastly critical of actions and inactions that threatened the nationalist cause. In May 1923, Premchand authored a critique of the *shuddhi* (purification) movement in the Urdu language magazine *Zamana* (*The Age*). The Arya Samaj, an extreme Hindu political party, organized a program that called for the conversion of Malkana Rajput Muslims in order to increase the Hindu population. Premchand in particular was critical of the leadership of the Congress party because they had failed to speak out against individual members who supported

¹⁴ Munshi Premchand, *Kāyākalpa* (Benaras: Saraswati Press, 1959). See also Gopal, *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography*, 228.

the *shuddhi* cause.¹⁵ He also noted the consequences of this program for national unity: the silence of nationalist leaders on the actions of conservative Hindu elites would raise Muslim skepticism that they were equal members in the political cause. In February 1924, Premchand published an essay in *Zamana* titled “*Qahat-ur Rijal*” (Famine of Wise Men). In this essay he is critical of Hindu dismissal of the Khilafat movement, maintaining that Hindu leaders neither understand nor care to understand the movement’s positive implications for national unity.¹⁶ He raises the example of tolerant Muslims in his reference to the brothers Mohammad and Shaukat Ali as dedicated Muslims who can also be nationalist patriots.

In these essays, Premchand indicts extreme Hindu views and political inaction as threatening the possibility of national unity that is necessary for the time. He is eager to highlight examples of Muslim participation in the nationalist movement, which challenges the claim of inherent Muslim separatism. Premchand was “convinced” that Hindu ignorance of Islamic cultures and histories was one of the reasons for the Hindu prejudice that Islam is an “aggressive religion” committed to the cause of *jihād* (struggle, or holy war).¹⁷ Premchand’s *Karbala* is part of a personal history of efforts to use literature as a method of educating readers about inter-religious histories and experiences, and advocating for the social unity that the nationalist movement required. What distinguishes *Karbala* is that for the first time, Premchand takes up a sacred Islamic history for his literary endeavor. Impressed by a sacred Muslim history, Premchand hoped to similarly inspire his readers to fight British imperialism using the moral example of Husayn and his companions.

¹⁵ Gopal, *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography*, 217.

¹⁶ For the essay, see *Ibid.*

¹⁷ V.S. Naravane, *Premchand: His Life and Work* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980), 66.

III: Sacrifice, Justice, and Ethics in *Karbala*

*Insaan ko bedaar to ho lene do
Har qaum pukaregi "Humare Hain Husayn"*

*Just let humanity awaken
Every community will say "Husayn is ours"*

Josh Malihabadi, "Rubayāt"¹⁸

Karbala was first published in Hindi in November 1924 by the Ganga Pustak Mela of Lucknow. It was later serialized in the Urdu magazine *Zamana* from July 1926 to April 1928. The play was published first as a stand-alone text in Hindi and serialized in the Urdu magazine *Zamana* based in Kanpur, United Provinces (today Uttar Pradesh). To date, there is no record of *Karbala* being performed.¹⁹ The structure of the play reflects what is accepted as the core narrative of the historical Karbala event, a battle between Yazid and the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Husayn and his family that occurred in 680 CE in the desert plains of today's southern Iraq. This conflict is paradigmatic of the early split in the Muslim community over the rightful inheritance of leadership that determines who assumes the position of the Caliph. Husayn represents what is today the Shi'i view that community leadership falls to the male heirs of Fatima, the Prophet's daughter. Yazid and his supporters represent what would come to be identified with the Sunni position that leaders are chosen on the basis of a consensus (*shura*) of community elders. The battle of Karbala continues to be the basis for Shi'i annual ritual commemorations during the Islamic month of Muharram, when it is said that the fighting occurred.

The drama takes place over five acts and forty-three scenes, with few stage directions. It

¹⁸ Josh Malihabadi, *Josh ke inqilābī marsiye: ma' 'irfānī va risā'ī kalām*, Hilāl Naqvī, contributor (Oslo, Nārve: Tauīd Islāmīk Sainar, 2010), 276.

¹⁹ The play was also published in Hindi by Saraswati Press in 1958, in Hindi by Vani Prakashan in 2007, and in Urdu as part of Gopal and Sidiqqi's collected works of Premchand (*Kulliyat-i Premchand*) in 2000.

begins with a scene from the *darbar*, or court, of Husayn's main adversary Yazid. Drinking wine and speaking to his courtiers, Yazid learns that of all those in the city, only Husayn has refused to accept allegiance (*bai'at*), which would effectively relinquish any claims that he had on leadership of the young Muslim community. Yazid receives mixed advice: several of his men encourage him to secure the allegiance forcefully if necessary, while his wife Hindah cautions him against this course of action because Husayn is family of the Prophet Muhammad, and to use force against him would be disrespectful. Despite this lone voice of warning, Yazid decides to send a messenger to Medina and to Husayn. The scene ends with a discussion of who amongst those affiliated with the court would be most trustworthy and best suited to force Husayn's hand and secure the allegiance.

It is Yazid who ends up traveling to Medina, however, and Premchand's play largely conforms to established Shi'i narratives of how the events of Karbala unfolded. Husayn rejects political (and spiritual) commitment to Yazid, thus providing the central tension of the event. In the town of Kufa (modern day Iraq) a group of supporters requests Husayn's assistance and he agrees to travel there with his family. The governor of Kufa, Ibn Zayid, orchestrates an ambush of Husayn and his family and murders several of Husayn's companions. On their way to Kufa, the grandson of the Prophet and his family are confronted by Yazid's army at Karbala, where the battle takes place over the course of several days. One by one, members of Husayn's family and his companions are slaughtered on the battlefield. On the tenth day, Husayn himself is martyred and the women of the family are taken as prisoners to Damascus.

The historical play is a dramatic form recognized as a method for producing historical knowledge, specifically in terms of how the past relates to the present. Premchand chose this form of representation to express his political message regarding the pressing need for social

unity in the nationalist movement. *Karbala* is part of a historical trend in Indian drama wherein authors creatively revisit the past in response to social developments that define their present. The ways in which Premchand develops characterization and participation in *Karbala* provides new bases of social affiliation and belonging beyond the simple bonds of a social compact. In his rendering of Hindu and Muslim cooperation at *Karbala*, Premchand develops a blueprint for cooperation against injustice in which faith commitments have a foundational role.

“To die for truth and justice is a particular principle of our lives”: Obligation and Participation in the *Karbala* Battle

Premchand’s play is unique amongst South Asian tellings of the *Karbala* event because the author inserts a storyline of Hindu assistance in the battle. This Hindu disposition stands for social justice and conceptualizes obligation as part of what is required of their faith (*dharma*). A family of seven Hindu brothers, led by Sahas Rai, first hear of Yazid’s seizure of the Caliph position in the seventh scene of the first act of the play. Premchand introduces the Hindus in a scene that forefronts their piety: “An Arabian village. A stately Hindu temple and a fortified *ghāt* have been built.²⁰ There is a lovely garden. Around a pond are peacock, deer, cows, and other animals. Sahas Rai and his friends are busy in *puja* rituals near the pond.”²¹ The scene begins with Sahas alone in prayer, voicing his wishes to God (*bhagwan*) that he and his brothers forever remain within the strictures of their religious beliefs (*mazhabī ‘aqidat*). He continues to wish that the brothers always remain devoted to the truth (*sadāqat*) and to justice (*insāf*).²² A servant

²⁰ A *ghāt* is a formation of steps leading to a body of water.

²¹ Premchand, *Karbala* (2007), 53.

²² Ibid.

interrupts this tranquil setting to inform Sahas that Hazrat Amir Mu'awiya's son Yazid has captured the caliphate. Sahas' immediate reaction is one of surprise, because he and his brothers know that the position is rightfully Husayn's:

Sahas Rai: Yazid has taken the Caliphate!? How? What right did he have on the Caliphate? The Caliphate was to have been given to Hazrat Husayn, the son of Hazrat Ali.

Harjis Rai: Yes, only Husayn has rights to the Caliphate. This was the very stipulation on which the truce (*sul'h*) existed since Amir Mu'awiya.

Singh Das: This is the trickery of Yazid. I know that Yazid is a vain, angry, and depraved person always engrossed in debauchery. We are never going to be able to accept his immoral usurping of the Caliphate.²³

After asking about Husayn's whereabouts, the men hear that he has left Medina and is headed in the direction of Mecca. They then debate how they should respond. One of the brothers criticizes Husayn for not immediately announcing his own right to the Caliph position. Another brother remarks that Husayn is the protector of religion (*deen parvar*), yet personally he does not desire to spill the blood of his Muslim brothers. Swordsmanship in the defense of justice isn't a sin and the destruction of men is preferable to the abolition of justice, argues a fourth brother.

Listening to the debate, Sahas Rai finally weighs in with his opinion on how to respond. He voices a support of Husayn that is based on a Hindu respect for justice and solidarity with Islamic principles:

If it is true that Yazid usurped the Caliphate, then we will have to act according to our religious principles (Urdu: *mazhabī usul*; Hindi: *vrat*) and be supporters of justice. There is no doubt of Yazid's majesty and power, but we are not able to go against the demands of religious injunctions (Urdu: *mazhabī quvanein*; Hindi: *nyay-vrat*).²⁴

The brothers decide to travel to Karbala to participate in the battle. Along the way, they come

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 54.

across Wahab, a member of Husayn's contingent, and his wife Naseema.²⁵ Curious, Wahab approaches the seven men to inquire as to who they are, and where they are going. Sahas Rai explains that they are headed to Karbala to fight for Husayn. He then turns the questions onto Wahab, asking if he had proclaimed allegiance to Yazid. Disgusted, Wahab retorts, "How could I begin to accept allegiance to that tyrant?" This brief exchange between the two men is another moment that affirms the Hindu brothers' fidelity to Husayn, and to the fight for justice. Their righteous commitment to the cause places them in a moral position to question where Muslims such as Wahab stand on the question of Yazid's authority.

In the culminating scenes featuring the Rai brothers, the ethical terms of their participation are made explicit in scenes of prayer and battle. They return late in the play, when Husayn and his men are well into the battle with Shemr and his faction. The grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and his troupe are suffering from the attack of bows laced with fire and suddenly it seems as if this might be the final fight. At a moment of the enemy's retreat, Habib, one of Husayn's loyal fighters, remarks to the others present that it is time for ritual prayer (*namaz*): "Oh Maula, the enemy is off for a few moments. It is time for prayer. It is our wish that we pray for the final time with you. This opportunity may not happen again."²⁶ Husayn responds with surprise that the enemy would not allow the battle to cease temporarily so that all may pray unhindered. Shemr replies that respite will not be given to Husayn and his men, because they are traitors and therefore not protected by Islamic principles (*shāri'at*).

At this moment, Sahas Rai and his brothers arrive on the battlefield and offer to protect Husayn and his men so that they may complete their prayers. Once the *namaz* is finished,

²⁵ Ibid., 161-162.

²⁶ Ibid., 173.

Husayn addresses the Hindu brothers and his own men with praise for their religious ethics that have inspired them to protect the Muslims present:

Friends! My dear sympathizers (*gham-gusar*)! This will be a memorable *namaz* prayer in Islamic history. If these brave men of God (*khuda*) had not stood in our support and saved us from the enemy's arrows our prayers would never have been fulfilled. Oh devotees to truth (*haq parast*), we give our greetings of peace to you. Although you might not be believers (*momin*), nevertheless the followers of that religion who are protectors of rights, sacrificers for justice, thought to be not worthy of this life, in the protection of the oppressed about to be beheaded--they are certainly true and thanked by God. May that religion always stand firm in the world. And with the light of Islam, its light will be spread everywhere.

Following this praise of a Hindu ethical obligation to protect and assist Husayn's cause, Sahas Rai pledges the fidelity and assistance of his entire religious community:

Sahas Rai (*to Husayn*): You have blessed us in our truth, and for this we thank you. I also pray to God (*iśvar*) that whenever Islam needs our blood, there is no shortage in our community (*qaum*) of those who will sacrifice themselves for the cause. Now we request permission to go to the battlefield. In defense of truth we will sacrifice our lives.

Husayn: Never. My friends! Until we remain alive we will not allow our guests (*mehman*) to go to the battlefield.

Sahas Rai: Sir, we are not your guests, we are your servants. Dying for justice and truth are particular principles (*khās usul*) of our lives. It is our duty (*farz*). It is not a favor to anyone.

Husayn: How can I say that you can go? God willing, that which is built from our blood in this field will always be protected from harms of the age, and never become desolate. May the sounds of sweet songs always be loud and the rays of the sun continue to shine upon it.²⁷

Despite Husayn's unwillingness to allow the men to enter the fight, the seven brothers proceed and walk, singing, onto the battlefield. One by one and in excruciating detail, Shemr and his army murder the Hindu supporters of Husayn. Once the last brother has perished, both Husayn and his half-brother Abbas praise the men for their heroism and valiant fight. Abbas describes them as martyrs for the cause of Islam: "The reality has now been revealed that Islam exists outside the realm of Islam. These are true Muslims, and it is not conceivable that the Prophet

²⁷ Ibid., 174.

Muhammad will not intercede (*shafa'at*) on their behalf.”²⁸ In accordance with Hindu custom, the brothers are cremated in a ceremony led by Husayn himself. In his eulogy, Husayn maintains that the men came from that country where the standard of God’s unity (*tawhīd*) was first made known:

The brothers belong to that sacred country (*pāk mulk*) where the cries of God's unity (*tawhīd*) were first heard loudly. I pray to God (*khuda*) that in martyrdom they are granted high status. The flames have risen in the funeral pyre. Oh God, never erase this lamentation from the heart! May our courageous ones always spill our blood for these people. May the seed which today has been sewn in fire remain green and verdant till doomsday (*qiyāmat*).²⁹

Premchand uses these brothers to render the Hindu relationship to Muslim concerns in ways that are informed by ethical and religious principles. The Hindus are adamant that their role to support Husayn is required as part of their religious duty to support justice. How Premchand characterizes Husayn and his companions’ response to the actions of the Rai brothers reveals the messages for Muslims in the narrative. As a consequence of the brothers’ participation on the side of Husayn and martyrdom for the cause, they are proclaimed to be part of the brotherhood of Islam. This subplot emphasizes that Hindu religious principles mandate standing up for social justice, and that Muslims should recognize this as evidence of an Islam, in the words of Abbas, “outside the realm of Islam.”

That Hindus were present in Arabia in the seventh-century is a matter of conjecture. Some base it on a legend of Brahmins who had settled there in ancient times. According to Madan Gopal, one of Premchand’s main biographers, how these Brahmins reached Mesopotamia is not clear, yet he relates two theories. One hypothesis is that they were descendants of Aśvatthāmā, a figure from the *Mahābhārata* who had migrated to the area. Another suggestion is

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 175.

that they had settled in Arabia after traveling with Alexander when he left the Punjab in the early 4th century CE. Mohammed Mujeeb describes the community as “Husaini Brahmins,” who were “followers of Atharaveda” and were named after the grandson of the Prophet. In his study he discusses these Hindus in terms of practice, and does not mention any connection between they may have had with the events at Karbala:

It could be said that they were not really converts to Islam, but had adopted such Islamic beliefs and practices as were not deemed contrary to the Hindu faith. Except beef they ate secretly all other kinds of meat. The men dressed like Muslims, but put the *tilak*, or browmark, on their foreheads. They did not practice circumcision, their marriages were performed by a priest of their own class, and they buried their dead in a sitting posture. At the same time they fasted during Ramadan and followed other Muslim practices. They held the saint Khwajah Mu'inuddin of Ajmer in special reverence.³⁰

Any historical evidence for these theories is scant, and a Hindu presence at Karbala is not found in other South Asian literatures about the battle. Therefore, Premchand had little guidance as to how to depict the motivations of Hindus and their reception by Muslims.

The history Premchand writes into his historical drama about a seventh-century religious event addresses key concerns that are intimately related to his twentieth-century present. His imagining of a Hindu and Muslim cooperation at Karbala stresses how the ethical obligations of both faiths require an active fight to uphold the principles of justice. His rendering of these concerns in this drama has important messages for Hindu and Muslim readers exposed to *Karbala* at a moment of political tension. If Hindus and Muslims could cooperate in a battle for justice on a distant seventh-century Karbala battlefield, they should be able to participate together for the contemporary cause of nationalist unity against foreign, imperial interests.

The national unity that Premchand emphasizes in *Karbala* participates in a genealogy of the idea of secularism in Indian social thought. Premchand’s characterizations of both Hindu and

³⁰ Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, 16.

Muslim characters conceptualize social solidarity in which religion as faith plays an essential role. The men come together in allegiance for social justice informed by their individual religious principles. In this way, Premchand's conception of national belonging as theorized in *Karbala* extends a Gandhian reading of the secularist project. Like Gandhi, Premchand's rendering of group solidarity takes the focus away from the state and emphasizes the roles that faith and community have for social unity. This is a conception of citizenship informed by religion as faith. The Hindu Sahas Rai makes clear the connection between faith and action when he explains to his brothers that, "we will have to act according to our religious principles and be supporters of justice." In the play Hindus and Muslims articulate the terms of belonging as a matter of religious obligation, based on both Hindu *dharma* and Muslim custom (*rivayaat*), which indicates how social unity is possible not only in terms of a shared political or civic cause. It is in the ways that religious affiliations allow for the political articulation of how Hindus and Muslims belong to each other, and by implication as members of a social unit, that Premchand's characterizations develop Indian ideas of secularism.

IV: "Did I Depict Yazid As More Debased Than This?": Reactions to Premchand's *Karbala*

Critique about accuracy and exaggeration in historical fiction reveals how playwrights theorize the terms of the relationship between drama and history, and the limits of creative interpretation. Jaishankar Prasad (1889-1937), a contemporary of Premchand, was a prolific composer of Hindi drama, short stories, and poetry.³¹ Written between the years 1911 to 1937, more than half of his thirteen plays are based on the ancient history of the subcontinent. As a

³¹ For English-language literary interpretation and criticism of Prasad's works, see Dr. Nagendra, ed., *Jayashankar Prasad: His Mind and Art* (Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 1989), and Ramesh Chandra Shah, *Jaishankar Prasad* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1978).

practitioner working with history in fictional form, Prasad occasionally replied to critiques that his historical plays were not “accurate.” He discussed the problem as one of expectations and the tendency of historical writing to be monotonous:

Today we look upon the truth as being facts. Yet we are not satisfied with mere chronology of dates and events but are keen on discerning the psychological import of events through an extensive research of history...it is this approach alone which gives us insight into the truth of events. Mere events become gross and momentary and fade away into oblivion but the subtler experience or import becomes the abiding truth for ages to follow.³²

Prasad’s comments suggest the predicament for writers of historical fiction. There is an expectation that the history play will get the historical facts “right,” while at the same time it should shed light on the motives and experiences of history, which requires creative interpretation. Premchand had to answer critiques of his interpretation of the history of the Karbala and similar to Prasad, his response reveals how he theorizes the role of history to its dramatic representation. Premchand’s correspondence with Daya Narain Nigam, the editor of *Zamana*, reveals his intentions with this play and the steps he took to develop a drama that he felt was faithful to the spirit, as well as the Shi’i history, of the Karbala battle. Writing from Benaras in a letter dated February 17, 1924, Premchand explained to Nigam that he had been reading about the life of Husayn and was thus inspired to write a drama based on the events of Husayn’s martyrdom.³³ As evidenced in these letters, Premchand was convinced that Hindu ignorance of Islamic cultures and histories was one of the reasons for the prejudice of some that Islam is an aggressive religion committed to the cause of *jihad*.³⁴

Letters exchanged between Premchand and his editor reveal that Nigam was hesitant to

³² Quoted in Rajendra Singh, *Jaishankar Prasad* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 93.

³³ File 696/152, NMML. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Premchand’s correspondence regarding the play are my own.

³⁴ Quoted in Naravane, *Premchand: His Life and Work*, 66.

publish this play in his magazine, very likely due to the conditions of heightened religious and political tension. He encouraged Premchand to write a play that would not unduly upset Muslim sentiments, to which Premchand replied, “I assure you that I have been extremely careful to make certain that no disrespect is shown to them (Muslims). I have considered each and every word carefully, so that Muslim religious sensibilities are not traumatized.”³⁵ It seems as if Nigam was not convinced by Premchand’s words. The editor evidently shared some of the play with local Shi’is, and at least some of them voiced concern and criticism. A member of the *Zamana* staff, Syed Ahsan Ali Sambhi, reported to Nigam that the potential to upset Muslims was too great to merit the magazine’s publication of *Karbala*.³⁶ One certainty revealed within Premchand and Nigam’s correspondence is that some objected to his depiction of Yazid, calling it an exaggeration. In a letter to Nigam dated July 22, 1924, Premchand responded to this analysis by claiming that he had done nothing more than what other Muslim authors had done in the past. Premchand cites the Shi’i scholar Maulana Amir Ali’s description of a “cruel” and “treacherous” Yazid to show how Shi’i authors themselves emphasize his depraved nature:

From me, Yazid’s moral status is lower than what historians depict. I was helpless in that I mentioned only his drinking, gambling, and debauchery. He was an alcoholic. After the Rashidun Caliphs (the first four Caliphs in Islam) all of the other Caliphs drank alcohol. And they drank “dharhley.” Maulana Amir Ali has this to say about Yazid:

“Yazid was both cruel and treacherous: his depraved nature knew no pity or justice. His pleasures were as degrading as his companions were low and vicious. He insulted the ministers of religion by dressing up a monkey as a learned divine and carrying the animal mounted on a beautifully caparisoned Syrian donkey. Drunken riotousness prevailed at court....”

You must regard Amir Ali as authoritative. Did I depict Yazid as more debased than this?³⁷

³⁵ File 696/152, NMML.

³⁶ Gopal, *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography*, 177.

³⁷ File 696/263, NMML. Curiously, the excerpt from Amir Ali is quoted in English while the rest of the letter is handwritten in Urdu.

Amir Ali, Premchand remarks, was a Muslim. He continues his defense by citing the example of Khwaja Hassan Nizami—a Muslim—whose recent publication on the life of the Hindu deity Krishna intended to encourage Muslim respect for the deity.³⁸ Premchand describes how in their praise of the work, reviewers noted that Nizami's reverence for a Hindu subject was remarkable because of his Muslim identity. He explains to Nigam that his intention was exactly the same as Nizami's—to encourage Hindu respect for the Muslim leader Husayn. Premchand goes on to reveal that he believes the actual problem some Muslims have with *Karbala* relates to his religious identification as Hindu:

You (Nigam) are saying that Shi'i scholars would object to a drama about one of their religious figures. If Shi'i Muslims read a *masnavi* or *marsiya* on the lives of these leaders, why should they have an objection with this drama? Or, is it because a Hindu wrote it?³⁹

Despite his efforts to draw attention to a courageous Muslim leader in order to promote his ideological agenda, Premchand's work was undercut by the narrow assumptions of religious identity that he sought to challenge. The debate over Premchand's presentation of history between himself, his editor Nigam, and local Shi'i leaders reached the point where Premchand became suddenly unconcerned with the play's publication. In his July 1924 letter to Nigam, Premchand directed him to "kindly return the manuscript," concluding that if Muslims couldn't accept the fact that a Hindu writer wrote in praise of their leader, then he was not keen on the play's distribution.⁴⁰

These negative reactions to his play *Karbala* prompted Premchand to reflect on the implications for his fictional rendering of a historical event. He countered criticism of his

³⁸ Quoted in Gopal, *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography*, 236.

³⁹ File 696/152, NMML.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

fictionalized history by maintaining that there are two different categories of drama: those to be read only, and those to be read and staged. He was adamant that *Karbala* was a drama of the former type: “drama occurs in two types. One is for reading. One is for the stage. This drama has been written merely for reading. Not for acting.”⁴¹ In his July 1924 letter to Nigam, Premchand remarks:

You yourself agree that there is a difference between history and historical drama. It is not possible to change the main characters of a historical drama. However, one is free to introduce changes to secondary characters, even to the extent of innovation. Asgar’s (Husayn’s son) age was six months. In some traditions however, his age is written as six years. I have chosen that version which is consistent with my purpose. Even if there were no traditions about Asgar, he is not an important character in this drama.

Comments from this letter to Nigam reveal his assumptions about the differences and disconnections between history and drama: “drama is not history. It doesn’t have any effect on historical characters. The goal of this (*Karbala*) drama is to inspire Hindu admiration for Husayn. Along with being historical, this drama is political.”⁴² Premchand’s various defenses of what he attempts in *Karbala* curiously claim to both show his fidelity to the historical record, and to disavow that his dramatization is related to history at all.

His distinction between the form of drama as a text for reading, and as a text for performance, assumes that a certain amount of creative interpretation is acceptable in the former and not the latter. According to this logic, historical exaggeration is not appropriate when the method of performance is an embodied presentation. In her comments on the functions of historical drama, Aparna Dharwadker notes how the form “creates ambivalence by collapsing the nation’s past into its present, and its narrative unfolds not only as text but as performance.”⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 225.

Premchand's assumptions about the difference between reading and performing historical drama extend this analysis to suggest the risks that embodiment presents for the dilemma that writers of historical drama contend with in their work. Elements of creative interpretation that, as Prasad noted, are necessary to make the past interesting for audiences are imbued with different and potentially subversive meanings when they move from text to embodied performance.

V: Translation, Representation, and Religious Histories

Premchand's efforts to take a paradigmatic event from its position in devotional literatures and contexts and attempt to render it comprehensible in dramatic prose raise questions about appropriation and representation in the translation of religious expression. As Said argues in *Orientalism*, the act of representation is an ideological one that should be analyzed by its tropes and characterizations, and within relevant historical and political contexts of production.⁴⁴ Similarly the act of translation should be scrutinized for what remains to be interpreted, and what is lost in translation. Gayatri Spivak's criticism of translation identifies the tendency of this process to dislocate a primary text from its cultural and linguistic origins; as a consequence, texts are distorted in the attempt to decipher them in different settings.⁴⁵ The process of interpretation is also theorized as one that is inherently productive because writing gains new readers and cultural contexts when it is translated. Ramanujan's concept of the value of a "retelling" is important to a new view on Premchand's *Karbala* that would see it as participating in a longer literary life of the seventh-century event.

⁴⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 20-21.

⁴⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), pps. 455-466.

If *Karbala* is understood not as a variation and instead as a retelling, his creative interpretation extends the relevance and life of the story in productive ways. There are ways that the *Karbala* text, as a retelling, is constitutive literally and symbolically. The publication of the text as a stand-alone play in Hindi, and a serialized work in Urdu, suggests that it moved into new reading publics in the 1920s.⁴⁶ Premchand's choice to use the *Karbala* event for literary production in service to his political goals gives the narrative new literary and political value. He wanted his play to instruct his readers on the symbolic value of Muslim history at a time when the relations between religious communities was a matter of political concern. That Premchand found the dramatic story suitable to his ideological needs gives to the text a new place in terms of the discourse on Hindu and Muslim belonging in North India.

In his choice to use a Shi'i history for a nationalist play, Premchand dislocated the narrative from its primary location within Shi'i devotional expression. The varied reactions to his work reveal how choices made in his attempt to render a seventh-century event for his twentieth-century readers threatened his political hopes with the drama. As revealed in his correspondence, some in the Shi'i community objected outright to his intentions of creating a drama regarding the events of *Karbala*. Others accused his translation of exaggerating the evil nature of Husayn's adversary Yazid. Although *Karbala* was eventually published, this reaction suggests that Premchand's recourse to a sacred religious event threatened to undercut his goals to intervene in his political context. Premchand may have taken for granted the fact that the core narrative of his play is not just any history—it is a *religious* history, and one with paradigmatic resonance for Shi'is (and others). Therefore, his acts at translation and interpretation were met with particular concern and scrutiny.

⁴⁶ At the time of writing, I have little circulation information about both versions of the play. It is an angle of the play's contexts that I will develop in later work.

Some scholars of world and comparative literature point to sacred texts as evidence of that which is untranslatable. Emily Apter is one such critic who warns that a major challenge for the study of the humanities is how to incorporate sacred texts. She frames the problem in terms of a battle of how texts may remain sacred in face of the secular, or in her words, “how to take sacral un-translatability at its word without secularist condescension.”⁴⁷ In her discussion of the sacred untranslatable, Apter quotes Abdelfattah Kilito’s injunction “thou shalt not translate me”—a diagnosis of the Qur’an’s long-standing status as an untranslatable sacred text.⁴⁸ At issue is whether religious and sacred texts are open for revision or inspection, particularly in a setting far removed from its typical milieu. This is what the act of Premchand’s appropriation of the Karbala narrative amounts to—his play takes the seventh-century paradigmatic story out of its usual devotional context and brings it to an emerging, national space of print and publishing. Objections to Premchand’s play on the grounds that it is a sacred text seem to stem not from the fact that he accessed a revered history, but more from his license to interpret (hence the exaggeration charge). To borrow Kilito’s phrasing, the reception to *Karbala* suggests that it is not simply that “thou shalt not translate”—rather, it is “thou shalt translate correctly.”

As evidenced from his letters, Premchand suspected that the real reason his translation was brought under suspicion is the fact of his identity as a Hindu writer. To support his claim, Premchand located his translation as consistent with how other Muslim authors have characterized individuals part of the Karbala story. He also raised instances of Muslim authors working with Hindu religious histories who were praised for their interpretations, rather than

⁴⁷ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London, New York: Verso, 2013), 14.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 12.

criticized. Premchand's conclusion that the real reason why some Muslims found fault with his translation is because he is a Hindu, and not because of misrepresentation or historical inaccuracy, indicates the obstacles that he faced with developing *Karbala*. The communal context of the play's production and reception meant that any cultural or political expression was narrowly construed within categories of belonging defined by religious community, which came with it assumptions about language, history, and cultural expression.

It is interesting that his insertion of Hindu participation is not one of the known critiques of *Karbala*. In all of the discussion about realism and fidelity to the historical record, no one questioned the uncertain role of Hindus in the seventh- century battle. Instead, it was for other reasons that the drama was criticized. The issue of authorial identity and religion was important, as Premchand assumed that it was primarily because of his Hindu identity that Muslims were critical of his text. As his editor Nigam warned, the political context called for reservation so as to not upset Muslim sentiments with characterizations of Muslims in the play.

Another aspect of Premchand's play suggests how his communal context may have influenced how characters were translated in terms of modern assumptions about language and religious identity. Different registers of spoken Hindi and Urdu mark the main characters and thus reveal the relationship of language and characterization in the play. For example, the Hindu brothers speak a slightly Sanskritized Hindi, and the Muslim characters use a heavily Persianized and Arabicized Urdu. One reason why Premchand may have used such a high register of Urdu is because he used Shi'i devotional poetry in his research for writing the play.⁴⁹ However, Premchand's remarks on these differences in linguistic register offer his rationale unrelated to source materials. An introductory essay included in the Sarasvati Press' 1985 Hindi publication

⁴⁹ Mentioned in Premchand's February 17, 1924 letter to Nigam. File 696/152, NMML.

of *Karbala* reveals his thoughts on several choices he made in the play. In his comments, Premchand explains his reasoning in developing the language of his characters: in the attempt to adhere to what is natural or innate (*svābhāvikata*), he avoided using a Sanskrit vocabulary (*śuddha hindī bhāṣā*) in the dialogues of Muslim characters. He maintains that holistically, the language of the dialogues reflects what he recognizes to be a language common to both Hindus and Muslims.⁵⁰ If spoken Hindi and Urdu during Premchand's early twentieth-century context could be theorized as a linguistic spectrum defined at either end by registers of Sanskrit and Persian, with a common core vocabulary at its center, it is curious that the language of this play does not reflect an everyday register as Premchand's explanation seems to indicate. His comments about realism betray the close connection between religious identity and linguistic register that nationalists like himself often disavowed in their championship of Hindustani to become the new national Indian language. Premchand's translation of the language of Hindu and Muslim characters is another example of translation's potential to distort. Although he claims to render the language of a character as natural, the vast differences in register indicate that instead, Premchand maps language and vocabulary choice onto his character's religious identity. This translation of language and character seems more relevant to Premchand's twentieth century context rather than the seventh-century past.

Considering the production, content, and reception to *Karbala* reveals how choices made in translation produced reactions and consequences that potentially undermine Premchand's artistic and political objectives. He was inspired by the ethical example of Husayn and was convinced that if Hindu readers were introduced to this history, they would join Muslims to fight against their contemporary Yazid—British imperialism. Instead, Premchand was questioned on

⁵⁰ Munshi Premchand, *Karbala* (Nayī Dillī: Sarasvatī Press, 1958), 4.

his translation of certain characters, and faced skepticism as a Hindu author interpreting a Muslim history. Criticism and doubt about his project indicate that the choice to represent a religious history in a context of high nationalist sentiment reveals that much was at stake for those involved in its production. Premchand's editor was concerned about offending Muslim sentiments. Some Muslims rejected his translation as unfaithful to the historical record. Premchand initially defended his choices, and went so far as to suggest that Muslims critical of his writing based their opinions on his identity as a Hindu rather than the contents of his work. How *Karbala* was produced, and how it was received, show the multiple consequences of translation as a process of representation wherein political interests, religious sentiments, and authorial intentions all intersect and influence how religious expressions move between forms and cultural contexts.

VI: Muslim Histories in Modern Indian Historical Drama

The practice of reviving history in dramatic performance is a major approach within modern Indian theatre.⁵¹ Premchand's recourse to a Shi'i Muslim history in *Karbala* is part of this tradition, wherein historical representation invites reinterpretation and is mobilized to serve the needs of the present. Part of the appeal of historical drama is, of course, related to the personal experience of the author. Girish Karnad, author of the play *Tughlaq*, connects his awareness of living in a historical moment to his renewed interest in history: "Independence had made history suddenly important to us; we were acutely conscious of living in a historically important era."⁵² Drama is an especially appealing form for playwrights with a social agenda

⁵¹ See Aparna Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence* (2005), for context on postcolonial Indian trends in theatre and drama.

⁵² Girish Karnad, "In Search of a New Theatre," in Carla Borden, ed., *Contemporary India: Essays on the Use of*

because performance has a complex and mediating role in how the past is known and re-interpreted. Jaishankar Prasad's interest in the past for dramatic representation was, according to Singh, "motivated by a search for explanation of the present and a desire to vindicate the forgotten aspects of Indian tradition."⁵³ Playwrights mobilize the past using the form of drama in order to make sense of developments in their existing circumstances. Both Premchand and Karnad drew on Muslim histories to produce a dramatic text that would intervene in the politics and social discourse regarding the state of Indian nationalism in their present. That they come to opposite conclusions, however, about the possibilities of social unity reveals the extent to which Indian social life and belonging had changed in a little over a generation.

The movement for Indian independence which had motivated nationalist supporters like Premchand ultimately achieved sovereignty for the Indian state, but the process was long and ended in devastating violence.⁵⁴ The creation of Pakistan displaced millions of persons on both sides of the new border, and criminal violence at this time included untold numbers of honor killings, rape, looting, and acts of communal retaliation. Agrarian reforms, infrastructural advancements, and industrialization efforts were complicated by resistance to land redistribution, the threat of a famine in 1960, and increasing bureaucratic processes.⁵⁵ Linguistic divisions also hampered political and social unity, and while the nationalist movement promised that the provincial boundaries of states would be reconfigured based on linguistic regions, Nehru initially

Tradition. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), pps. 93-105; 97.

⁵³ Singh, *Jaishankar Prasad*, 67.

⁵⁴ Major works on the events and violence of Partition are mentioned in the Introduction.

⁵⁵ See Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) for more on the history of and changes in the political economy of independent India.

resisted these changes.⁵⁶ For those who had lived through the late years of the nationalist movement and witnessed the end of colonial rule in the subcontinent, post-independence cleavages cast a long shadow on the promises of national unity that had dominated nationalist discourse.

As Karnad explains in his essay “In Search of a New Theatre,” *Tughlaq* was his disenchanted response to the promises of the nationalist movement and Nehruvian socialism: “in a sense, the play reflected the slow disillusionment my generation felt with the new politics of independent India: the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence, and the coming to terms with cynicism and realpolitik.”⁵⁷ The failure of Tughlaq’s decision to move his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad is symbolic of the self-interested determinism of Indian leaders’ efforts to demonstrate their enlightened leadership at the cost of the entire populace’s survival. The vehicle for Karnad’s disillusionment is imperial Indian Muslim history, and the heart of the drama is his diagnosis of a pathology of failure at the highest political levels. Karnad’s play set in the fourteenth-century invites correlation with and commentary on India’s political present. Compared with what Premchand sought with *Karbala*, *Tughlaq* is a contrasting example of how a Muslim history is employed to serve the ideological goals of playwrights. Karnad’s play is a dramatic critique of the promises of Indian secularism, drawn from the historical example of failed Muslim rule over a diverse society.

His play certainly suggests the impossibility of some key assumptions of that project, such as national unity between Hindus and Muslims. In *Tughlaq*, a scarcity of resources only exacerbates the disunity of Hindus and Muslims under Tughlaq’s rule. Indeed, shared enmity for

⁵⁶ Benjamin Zachariah, *Nehru* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁵⁷ Karnad, “In Search of a New Theatre,” 98.

Tughlaq is perhaps what Hindus and Muslims have in common in the play. Premchand, on the other hand, used his play to advance nationalist goals through emphasis on a history of Hindu and Muslim cooperation on an ancient battlefield. In *Karbala*, Hindus and Muslims come together to fight against Yazid's injustice. When it is clear that both will give their lives for the cause, Hinduism and Islam are eulogized as religions of mutual respect and common strivers for justice. Through dramatizing the social relationships between India's Hindus and Muslims, both Premchand and Karnad inflect their readings of history in correspondence with their goals to either promote or critique the assumptions of national social unity.

South Asian historiography has shown how major thinkers of the Indian nationalist movement developed Hinduism as the religious symbol of the nation.⁵⁸ The plays discussed here offer an alternative to this narrative as they present Muslim history as the space within which to imagine, or indict, the nationalist project. The imaginative work of both *Tughlaq* and *Karbala* to develop Muslim histories as symbolic of national histories are unique interventions into Indian historiography. In contrast to approaches to modern Indian history that render Muslim relationships to the nation as accommodation or conflict, these dramatic presentations incorporate Islamic histories into national Indian histories, thus attributing to Islam and India's Muslims a constitutive role for narratives of the national past. A play such as *Karbala* prompts the question of what Indian history would look like if Muslim self-identification were understood not simply on sectarian terms, but also as an agent for integration into the national concept. Such

⁵⁸ Partha Chatterjee shows how the Bengali author Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) developed ideas about the nationalism of an independent India whose religious character was related to Hindu values and histories. See Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press: 1986). Vasudha Dalmia discusses how Bhartendu Harishchandra (1850-1885) created new arguments about Hindu tradition using idioms of progress and modernity that would eventually define modern Indian cultural nationalism. See Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bhāratendu Hariśchandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

a move would not only challenge the easy equation of religious identity as political identity. It would also allow scholarship to take seriously the ways that citizens may draw from their faith commitments as they conceptualize their national commitment.

Conclusion: The Ethical Inspiration of *Karbala*

Karbala presents a moment in North Indian history when a Hindu author deeply invested in the movement for Indian independence found inspiration in a sacred Shi'i history. Based on his assumption that Hindus were largely unaware of minority Muslim histories, and in particular examples of Muslim ethical and moral leadership, Premchand was convinced that if they were to come to know of the story of Husayn at Karbala they would join with Muslims in the nationalist cause of social unity. Despite initial resistance from his editor, and later from Muslims who had read his script, Premchand persisted with his plan to draw attention to this historical example of ethical action and social justice. Serialized publication from 1924 to 1926, along with a 1958 reprint, and the latest publication in 2007, suggest that *Karbala* and its message remain relevant to assumptions made about Hindus, Muslims, social life and religious belonging in postcolonial Indian discourse.

While the play *Karbala* is symbolic of a historical moment in context of north Indian religious and social history, the seventh-century events of Karbala and the ethical Shi'ism that inspired Premchand continue to motivate those invested in its message of social justice. Premchand linked the ethics of Husayn to the progress of national society and the objectives of nation-building that defined his nationalist era. Today, Shi'i women in Lucknow also draw from this Shi'i tradition of moral and ethical righteousness in their participation in greater Indian society, and as they conceptualize their responsibilities as Indian citizens. The influence that

Husayni ethics has on how Shi'i Muslims develop individual ideas of belonging to both community and nation is not of a sectarian nature. Rather, these Muslim voices draw on this tradition as they articulate the terms of their belonging as Muslims to the development of India.

Chapter Two

Representation in Devotional Contexts: Husayni Ethics and Education in the Shi'i *Majlis*

*Imam Husayn was the protector of the religion of Islam. He stood up against cruelty and sacrificed his life, and having done this Islam was forever saved. Every Husayni needs to have this kind of disposition—that wherever there is cruelty they should raise their voices loudly against it.*¹

--Shi'i Maulana Kalbe Jawad of Lucknow

Introduction: Lucknow Muharram

I was nervous to begin fieldwork with Sofia Nasir and other Shi'i women on the first evening of Muharram in October 2014. Sofia, a well-known orator in Lucknow's Shi'i community, had hosted many other research scholars interested in the rituals and poetics of Muharram. After I arrived at her home and explained myself and my work, Sofia took me to her sister-in-law's house, which is where the women in this neighborhood start their daily ritual gatherings. The front room where the ritual takes place was a frenzied scene: some women were comforting crying and fussy children; others were scanning the family's books of poetry to select which would be read this night; some were busy arranging the area where sacred items are placed.

As I would come to learn, each night of Muharram has a theme and the women who participate in these nighty assemblies select a poem which expresses that theme, to recite at each woman's home. On this night the title of the selection was "*Husayn, Aap ko Hindustān Bultata Hai! (Husayn, Hindustān calls you!)*"² I am familiar with Muharram poetics in South Asian

¹ Quoted from Jawad's *majlis* at the Gufran Ma'ab *imambarah*, October 15, 2015.

² The author of this poem is Dr. Abbas Raza Nayyar (Head, Urdu Department, Lucknow University). Personal communication with Qazi Asad, July 17 2016.

traditions and had never come across a poem or song which spoke about the connection between Husayn and India in this way. Asserting that Hindustān is calling on Husayn indicates that the example of ethics and social justice that he signifies is relevant to social life in India today. Declaring that Indian is looking to Husayn today interrupts how Muslims and their histories in post-independence, north Indian social life are often understood as sectarian, or foreign—in other words, not “Indian,” and certainly of little relevance to society and culture except as an anxiety. Therefore, I felt that this song had a very different message. The composer of this song is a Shi’i Muslim, and his composition indicates how some Muslims have a different perspective on the question of Muslim belonging that goes beyond the customary theses of conflict, adaptation, or accommodation. The Shi’i event of Karbala, a history which is remembered annually by India’s Muslim minority community, has a message of moral ethics and social justice which the majority of Indian society needs to hear.

The ethical message of Karbala is represented in annual Shi’i Muharram rituals, which is a genre of performance defined by its purpose to remember “tellings” of Muslim history. The *majlis* (pl: *majālis*), is used to describe how Shi’is gather during Muharram, and has been part of religious practice since the battle that it commemorates took place nearly 1400 years ago. The *majlis* is known as a “mourning assembly” because it is an important way in which those who want to honor and commemorate the sacrifices of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the third *khalifa* (leader) of Shi’i Islam, gather to express and show their grief and solidarity regarding a battle over authority of the young Muslim community. In Lucknow, India, Shi’i women in participate in a ritual colloquially called “*ghar ki majlis*” (assembly of the home). The rituals, participants, expectations, and ambivalences of the *ghar ki majlis* reveal this setting as a genre of performances of Muslim selves which are evaluated by other participants.

Women debate what constitutes “correct” participation in the *majlis*, a sacred space and place where socio-economic, ethical, and performative differences intersect to reveal assumptions about boundaries and belonging in contemporary Shi’ism.

The main function of the *majlis* is to bring participants together to remember and mourn, yet it is also a site for the expression of Shi’i etiquette (*adab*) and Shi’i ethics, which is conveyed by the concept of being “Husayni.” The influence that this example of ethical selfhood produced in devotional contexts is not limited to Shi’i self-understandings of tradition and community. What Shi’is in Lucknow describe as being Husayni is relevant to their identities as mothers, as spouses, and as members of Indian society. Ethical Shi’ism as voiced by women in Lucknow informs how they act as citizens of India and is how they connect their role in larger discourses of national progress. With emphases on the principle of sacrifice, working for social justice, and recognizing the humanity of all individuals, Muslim voices expressed within Shi’i ritual articulate identities that are Shi’a and also Indian.

I: Ritual, Performance, and Religious Experience

Rituals like the *majlis* gathering are a key approach to the study of religious experience, in part due to their many functions for individuals, traditions, and in connecting the sacred to one’s personal life. Theorists of ritual in religious studies have described the form and functions of ritual for communities and individuals in different ways, emphasizing solidarity and integration, the role of ritual in constituting and maintaining religious belief, and how ritual participation generates an awareness that influences collective action. Emile Durkheim identifies ritual as a key mechanism that provides individuals with social meaning, and in turn supports the

social order.³ His emphasis on the function of rituals forefronts how, through ritual participation, individuals are integrated into a larger social collective organized by veneration of what is understood as the sacred. Durkheim's thesis makes clear how rites and ceremonies facilitate social coherence and solidarity, however his functionalist approach has been critiqued for overlooking ideological contexts, and for giving too much primacy to the utility of religion for social coherence.⁴ His theory also fails to recognize that ritual need not be social, as ascetic traditions suggest. The *majlis* ritual has been described by many scholars as the primary ritual in Shi'i devotional life that facilitates group identity and structures social cohesion. Developments in the *majlis* show that ritual is more than simply bonding people together, as individual attitudes and assumptions about performance and sincerity in these rituals challenge group unity.

Another key approach to the study of ritual forefronts the individual experience in ritual participation. Clifford Geertz described ritual activities as sites where individuals encounter "models of" and "models for" society.⁵ His approach emphasizes the ideas, attitudes, and purposes that inspire individuals through an analysis of the symbolic meaning of ritual. In ceremonial events, Geertz explains that there occurs a "symbolic fusion of ethos and worldview," or a merger of individual desire and duty with their conception of the way the world actually is.⁶ His theorization of ritual demonstrates that even while society shapes religion—a central claim of functionalist approaches—it is also true that a society is shaped by its religion.

³ Emile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Joseph Ward Swain, trans. (New York: Free Press, 1965 (1915), 427-431.

⁴ See Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1970) for historical-materialist critiques of theories of social solidarity.

⁵ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basis Books, 1973), 37.

⁶ Ibid., 64.

Scholars of anthropology and religion have faulted Geertz's ideas on the point that they overlook the contexts and power structures within which ritual is articulated and carried out. Religious experience through ritual is not simply a cognitive process wherein individuals engage with symbols, as Geertz theorized. Talal Asad points out that individuals construct religion in their worlds through discourses of power and authority, which inflects both how symbols are constructed and interpreted.⁷ This critique of Geertz calls attention to the agency of individuals as they participate in the ritual process in ways that both affirm and contest the symbolic meanings presented in these situations. In the *ghar ki majlis*, not all participants agree on what kinds of outward performance indicate emotional sincerity and correct intention, and not everyone agrees that these evaluations are necessary or important. Some Shi'i women, due to their higher positions of authority within the group, publicly articulate their criticism of the conduct of others. Those with less influence tend to voice their dissenting opinions in "off-stage" contexts.

Participating in ritual acts is also theorized as a performance, which emphasizes the staged and constructed character of ritual. Elaborating on the relationship of ritual to social drama, Victor Turner explains that group conflict is transformed by the ritual process to become theatre.⁸ By "theatre" Turner is not suggesting, as would Goffman, that social acts are deceptive. Rather, the processes of ritualized social drama and theatre share a similar aesthetic form, thus analysis of the rhetoric of these events provides insight into social change.⁹ In his long

⁷ Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz." *Man*, New Series 18:2 (1983): 237-259; 240. Catherine Bell is critical of Geertz's bifurcation between thought and action in ritualized settings. See Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁸ Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 70.

⁹ Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories About Them," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), 141-168; 153.

engagement with theatre and drama, Turner often collaborated with theatre practitioner and theorist Richard Schechner, whose writings on theatre and ritual helped establish the academic study of performance.¹⁰ His approach to the study of ritual is to view it, alongside drama and what he terms “play,” as a form of performance.¹¹ One of Schechner’s interventions in the study of ritual and performance is his theorization of their operation in the world as along a spectrum of efficacy and entertainment.¹² These two objectives are not in opposition; they have a dialectical relationship, and while every performance has an element of both, one will be more dominant than the other.¹³ Schechner makes another distinction between ritual and theatre: rites and ceremonies “transform” the participant while theatre “transports” its audiences. The two are never mutually exclusive; theatre can enact meaningful change and ritual acts can fail to bring about the change that they seek.¹⁴

Comparisons of theatre and performance with ritual have produced several key insights on ritual’s purpose, possibilities, and performative qualities. Using the categorical language of dramaturgy to analyze ritualized social interactions draws attention to their scripted nature. It also pushes the observer to go beyond simple presentations and seek what is hidden from view—or what may be “backstage.” Turner’s theorization emphasizes how societies come together through ritual acts in a scripted nature similar to the development of roles and action in

¹⁰ Schechner, a prolific writer, elaborates on the relationship between ritual and performance in several works. See Richard Schechner and W. Appel, eds., *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theater and Ritual* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1988), and Schechner, *Performative Circumstances, From the Avant Garde to Ramlila* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983).

¹¹ Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory*, 52.

¹² Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 120.

¹³ Schechner, *Essays on Performance Theory*, 75.

¹⁴ Ibid., 63

performance. Ritual participation can affect individuals in profound ways; it can also fall short of its intended outcomes. Using the language of performance to analyze ritual also highlights an ambivalence inherent to the ritual process. If ceremonial acts can be constructed, they can also be deconstructed by participants and the discourses that mediate these circumstances. Shi'i women in Lucknow participating in the *ghar ki majlis* deconstruct their ritual activities as they evaluate the performances of others as a method of determining their sincerity. Several “off-stage” moments during fieldwork reveal how these ritual gatherings are also a setting for the performance and evaluation of emotion as indicators of proper intention. Drawing on performance as an interpretive category reveals the role of ritual in attempts at regulating appropriate behavior in devotional contexts.

II: The *Majlis* in Scholarship: Purpose and Function

English-language scholarship on Shi'i devotional traditions grew significantly in response to the politicization of Shi'i expression and Muharram rituals during the 1979 Iranian Revolution.¹⁵ As others have remarked, it is perhaps the very public and dramatic nature of Shi'i rituals, especially during Muharram, which explains the dominance of anthropological and sociological approaches to analysis of devotional Shi'ism.¹⁶ The purposes, outcomes, and

¹⁵ Key studies of Iranian Muharram traditions include Peter Chelkowski's edited collection of essays on “*ta'ziyeh*,” a dramatic performance of the events of Karbala that originated in Persian practices. See Chelkowski, ed., *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1979). A special issue of *The Drama Review* (1985) features essays on global Muharram practice, focusing on the multiple functions of *ta'ziyeh* for cultural expression, political protest, and Muslim sectarian difference. Kamran Scot Aghaie's study of Muharram rituals examines continuity and change across three historical periods: the Qajar Period, Pahlavi rule, and the post-1979 Islamic Republic. He identifies the ambivalent functions of these rituals to political rulers who at times adopt them for political gain, and at other times attempt to suppress them as a method of opposition. See Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran. The Martyrs of Karbala* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Karen Ruffle, “A Bride of One Night, A Widow Forever: Gender and Vernacularization in the Construction of South Asian Shi'i Hagiography,” (Ph.D. Diss, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007), 7.

intentions of the *majlis* gathering are debated in these studies of Shi'i devotion. These ritual settings are defined as at once edifying, soteriological, and sociological, and their functions are understood as complementary, and also in opposition. Education happens in the *majlis* in context of hearing the stories of sacred personalities and Shi'i histories.¹⁷ Simply attending these gatherings has spiritual benefits, however for many Shi'as the act of weeping is of particular soteriological importance. The significance placed on creating an emotionally charged atmosphere is what leads orators (*zakir* and *zakira*) to heighten the drama in their presentation of historical narrative, which for some veers into exaggeration and embellishment.

Vernon Schubel's ethnography of Muharram practices in Karachi, Pakistan describes the purpose of the *majlis* as dual in nature, since Shi'as participate in order to both learn history, and to encounter Shi'i sacred histories and personalities.¹⁸ In his analysis, these educational and soteriological functions of the *majlis* are not inconsistent; rather, they serve to reinforce each the objectives of the other.¹⁹ Schubel's study locates performance in terms of the role of the *zakir* and *zakira* in narrating Shi'i history, who present the narrative of the Karbala event do so in a manner that elicits a somber emotional response from participants. While some Shi'is accept that the need for an orator to stimulate a strong emotional response might mean elaborating upon the historical record, others find fault with such distortion and exaggeration. Schubel concludes that the Shi'i attitude towards how orators play with what is understood as historical fact is ambiguous; for some any deviation from history is incorrect, and for others, this is acceptable as

¹⁷ Akbar Hyder's description of the function of the *majlis* as a site for the production of alternative Islamic histories recognizes how these events interrupt the dominant Sunni narrative of early Muslim history. See Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 75-103.

¹⁸ Vernon Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi'i Devotional Rituals in South Asia* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 104.

¹⁹ Ibid.

long as it is intended to illicit emotion and grief.²⁰ The intention and outcomes of the *majlis* as a ritual gathering are diverse and, for some, inconsistent in their objectives. Shi'as do not uniformly agree on the purposes of the *majlis*, and for women in Lucknow who often practice without a *zakira*, what constitutes a proper mourning gathering has more to do with performances that signal proper intent and sincerity. For them, there is no dissonance in terms of the educational and salvific purposes of the *majlis*.

Durkheim recognized the importance of ritual to maintaining cohesion within the group of those who participate. This emphasis is found in sociological approaches to studies of the *majlis*, which discuss the role that it plays in fostering Shi'i group solidarity. Toby Howarth's discussion of *majlis* gatherings in Hyderabad argues that these ritualized gatherings serve to shape and confirm a distinct Shi'i identity, simply by their nature as simultaneously local and universal: "in different cultures and periods of history, the *majlis* and its message have taken on aspects of the contexts *in* which they have been held. But always the essential nature of the gathering has been the same: a re-telling of and mourning for Karbala in order to reinforce a distinct Shi'i identity (emphasis in original)."²¹ Schubel maintains that the *majlis* is "the ritual which plays the primary role in preserving the identity of the Shi'i community."²² The primacy given by scholars to the importance of the *majlis* in facilitating and maintaining a Shi'i identity overlooks how events and attitudes expressed in these gatherings reveal cleavages within the group. Differing attitudes towards appropriate behavior is one example of dissention; the unequal distribution of gifts which concludes each gathering is another. The nature of Shi'i dispositions

²⁰ Ibid., 105.

²¹ Howarth, *The Twelver Shi'a as a Muslim Minority in India*, 30.

²² Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam*, 103.

as viewed through *majlis* gatherings in Lucknow is contested, which indicates how these rituals also undermine group cohesion.

III: Shi'i Culture and Muharram in Lucknow

Finding that I had some free time in between gatherings, on the afternoon of the ninth day of Muharram I attended the *majlis* of Maulana Abbas Nasir at the Shia College on Victoria Street. Nasir is the young son of Aga Rouhie, perhaps the most popular *maulana* in Lucknow amongst young Shi'is because of his no-nonsense style of delivery and exposition of ideas. Nasir had just this year begun holding his own *majlis* during the time that his father customarily read, at 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

I took a seat on the upper balcony, an area restricted to women only. As I sat and waited for the *majlis* to begin two women arrived and organized themselves a little to my left. In the minutes there waiting we engaged in a short conversation about who we were and from where we had come. The older woman explained that she lives in Chandigarh, and her daughter accompanying her stays in Delhi. I mentioned that I too stay in Delhi. The woman asked why I was in Lucknow, and I explained a little about my research on women's ritual gatherings. She then commented on why the three of us—all from other places—had chosen to be in Lucknow during Muharram: “Lucknow has the most spectacular (*shandār*) Muharram in all of India. What you find in Lucknow you won't find anywhere else. Delhi can't even compare!”

Indeed, Lucknow was the most fruitful place for my study of women's *majālis* during Muharram. I conducted fieldwork in Lucknow's old city (*Chowk*) at women's gatherings over the course of two years, during Muharram in 2014 and 2015. My data is limited to the first ten days of Muharram—the most ritually intense time within a customary two months and eight-day period. The Shi'i community in Lucknow is a minority within a minority, numbering to nearly

twenty percent of the city's Muslim population, or about 190,000 people. Despite being a small community in light of Lucknow's 2.8 million inhabitants, the historical legacy of the Nawabs (Muslim nobility)²³ means that even today Lucknow's Shi'i are important to the city's culture and religious diversity.²⁴ The city is the historical center of Shi'i culture and community in north India, as it was developed by the Nawabs as the alternative to Delhi, a city in decline as the site of Muslim culture and political power. From the late 18th to the early 19th century, Shi'i notables, soon followed by lower classes in search of employment, migrated to what was then called Awadh.²⁵ Many within the literary establishment in Delhi relocated to Lucknow as well—including established Shi'i poets Mir Taqi Mir and Mirza Rafi'ud-Din Sauda. Elite sponsorship of Muharram rituals, through institutions such as the *imambarah* (public space for mourning assemblies) and public processions (*juloos*), helped to integrate a diverse Shi'i community.²⁶

Although Lucknow's position as a center of north Indian power and culture would decline as British colonial power consolidated in Calcutta and later Delhi, the Shi'i character of the city remains strong and the activities during the two months and eight days of the Muharram season continue to be vibrant. Each day of the important first ten days of Muharram, for example, I could count nearly fifty different *majālis* gatherings advertised at different locations

²³ Derived from the Arabic *na'ib* (نائب), *nawab* (نواب) is glossed as one who takes the place of another. In Mughal administration, Nawab was a titled conferred on local governors. Today it refers to a class of Muslim aristocracy and is primarily associated with Lucknow's history and culture. On the etymology of the word see J.T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*, s.v. "Nawab" (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1884), 1120, 1157.

²⁴ Demographic information on Lucknow Shi'i communities is taken from Raphael Susewind's online archive of contemporary Muslim social life in Lucknow. URL: <http://lucknow.rafael-susewind.de/> (Accessed October 28, 2015).

²⁵ Lucknow, today the capital of the state of Uttar Pradesh, was the second capital of Awadh province (1722-1857). Juan R.I. Cole discusses the political roles of several nawabs in early Awadh state formation. See Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq*, 36-50.

²⁶ Ibid., 93-97. See Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 85-86, for more on colonial Muharram practices in Lucknow and their connection to communal polemics between Sunnis and Shi'as.

in the Urdu language newspapers. In addition to a large number of assemblies several public processions, some dating back to the time of the Nawabs, occur in the first ten days of the ritual season. The neighborhood in which I resided during Muharram in 2014 and 2015, the Ghazi Mandi in an area called Chowk, is home to a number of Shi'i families and religious sites, including the famous *imambarahs* built by the Nawab rulers in the late eighteenth-century: the Bara (Asafi) Imambarah and the Chota (Hussainabad) Imambarah.

The vibrancy of practice associated with Muharram in Lucknow contrasts with how the city and its culture have been relegated to the past in scholarship. Major works in historiography focus on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and many end with the city's role in the 1857 Mutiny against British authorities.²⁷ The major publication on Lucknow's history—*The Lucknow Omnibus*, published by Oxford—is a compendium of the three major studies of urban culture, none of which extend beyond the early twentieth century.²⁸ Lucknow's status as a bygone city and culture is revised by several recent publications that recover the city as worthy of contemporary study. Violette Graff's edited collection of essays on Lucknow covers two hundred and fifty years of history and includes developments in the arts and architecture, nationalist politics, and communal conflict in the late twentieth century.²⁹ Veena Talwar Oldenburg's compendium of studies on Lucknow includes several pieces on modern Lucknow in fiction and

²⁷ In the preface to her study of the twenty-year period of Lucknow history after the Mutiny, Veena Talwar Oldenburg reports a friend's frustration with the periodization of Lucknow, remarking to her that, "I can't find a history book that mentions Lucknow after the Mutiny of 1857. Has nothing happened there since?" See Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), xvii.

²⁸ Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, Veena Talwar Oldenburg, and Abdul Halim Sharar. *The Lucknow Omnibus* (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). The studies compromising the Omnibus are: Abdul Halim Sharar, E.S. Harcourt and Fakir Hussain, trans. and ed., *Lucknow, the Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*; Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, *A Fatal Friendship: The Nawabs, The British, and The City of Lucknow*; Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877*.

²⁹ Violette Graff, *Lucknow: Memories of a City* (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

personal memoirs. Justin Jones' study of late nineteenth-century developments in the Shi'a community in Awadh and Lucknow focuses on Shi'a community formation. In a post-Mutiny period of social and religious change in north India, Shi'is systematized their legal and doctrinal traditions, established schools, and entered the public printing sphere. Jones shows how these changes led to growing Shi'i constructions of self and community as sectarian.³⁰ Recognized in popular memory and Indian historiography largely as a city defined by its colonial past, the present in Lucknow acknowledges its heritage yet refuses to let the 1857 Mutiny be the last episode of its history and culture worthy of scholarly study. Shi'i devotional practices in Lucknow today offer new ways to understand the intersections of religious tradition, national belonging, and minority perspectives to broader scholarship on Shi'i traditions.

Locating my research in Lucknow reveals how contemporary Shi'i practice elaborates upon ideas that circulate in other Shi'i contexts, such as debates on what constitutes "correct" ritual practice and the influence of the ethical example of Husayn both for the Shi'i community and beyond. I analyze these ritual actions using the lens of performance, which frames events as representation occurring "on stage" and "off stage." I observed how women participate in the *majlis* ritual as a performance of individuality and expression of devotion. In interviews with several women part of my nightly group of ritual participants, I uncover the "backstage" evaluations, assumptions, and judgments taken about what happens within the *majlis*. The language of performance reveals both how actions and expectations that inflect individual experience in the *majlis* ritual are constructed by participants. My analysis deconstructs events and actions occurring within the ritual to reveal assumptions about social position, positions on

³⁰ Justin Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India: Religion, Community, and Sectarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). See also Marshall Hodgson's essay on early developments towards sectarianism, "How Did the Early Shi'a Become Sectarian?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 75 (1955), pps. 1-13.

normative practice, and how the idea of what is normative is contested through individual ritual action.

IV: The *Ghar ki Majlis*: Gatherings to Commemorate a Sacred History

*The purpose of the majlis is to rid people of misunderstanding (ghalat fahmi).*³¹

--Shi'i Maulana Kalbe Jawad of Lucknow

In the first few days of the month of Muharram in 2014, a friend made a provocative statement during conversation with me about how she, from a prominent Delhi Shi'i family, felt about Muharram today. In her estimation, Muharram traditions are narrowly equated with the masculine street processions, and women's participation is overlooked.³² The result is that today Muharram is more about watching on television as a sort of spectacle than it is a time of for remembering the sacrifices of the Prophet's family and mourning for their cause. I felt that her observation disregarded how women (and men) witness public processions from the sidelines, many with enthusiasm and pride. However, her comment reflects the reality that the public face of Muharram ritual is male, which has led to a common ignorance of what it is that Shi'i women do to commemorate the sacrifices of Husayn and his companions at Karbala. Women have many duties during an intense ritual season like Muharram, related to maintaining the home and the sacred relics within the home's *imambarah*, making sure that the men of the house are supported

³¹ Quoted from Jawad's *majlis* at the Gufran Ma'ab *imambarah*, October 15, 2015.

³² Recent academic studies of female Shi'i piety in the Middle East and South Asia discuss ritual traditions in terms of gendered expression, recovering female agency, and in discourses of modernity and pious lives. See Mary Elaine Hegland, "Flagellation and Fundamentalism: (Trans)Forming Meaning, Identity, and Gender Through Pakistani Women's Rituals of Mourning," *American Ethnologist* 25 (1998), pps. 240-66, for an analysis of how Pukhtun Muharram rituals in Pakistan provide a space for women to question gender ideologies. In *A Pious Modern* (2007), Lara Deeb examines how Shi'i women's volunteerism and public activism in southern Beirut represent a pious Shi'i identity that emphasizes progress and is invested in discourses about what constitutes a modern self. Diane D'Souza discusses the role of gender on both an individual level of practice, and on an institutional platform, through study of the activities and publications of a women's organization in Hyderabad, India. See D'Souza, *Partners of Zaynab: A Gendered Perspective of Shia Muslim Faith* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2013).

to participate in their own ritual activities, and preparing food for their home and sometimes for their neighbors. They also gather together to recall the stories of the men and women who stood up for Husayn's cause and serve as role models for social justice and ethical action.

The ritual activities during Muharram which are central to historical and contemporary Shi'i piety and experience commemorate a battle for power over the early Muslim community in the year 680 CE, fought in the area called Karbala (located in today's Iraq). Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and son of 'Ali, the fourth Muslim *khalifa* (ruler) refused to pledge his allegiance to the Umayyad ruler Yazid and accept his rule over the community. The refusal is based on belief that authority should pass down within the Prophet's family and his descendants from his daughter Fatima and her husband, 'Ali, which would have given the *khalifa* position to Husayn. Under pressure from Yazid's supporters, Husayn was forced to leave the city of Mecca with his family. The family was offered refuge in Kufa, and as they headed in that direction they were ambushed by Yazid's forces at Karbala. In the course of ten days, the family and their companions (seventy-two people in total) were deprived of water and one by one, mercilessly slaughtered. Only the women of the family remained, and after the battle they were taken as prisoners to Damascus, then the center of Umayyad power. Shi'as believe that the institution of the *majlis* originated with these "tellings" after the battle.³³

The women part of the Karbala narrative provides historical models of ethics and sacrifice taken from Shi'i traditions. Husayn's sister and the only adult survivor of the battle, Zaynab, is a model for social justice and engagement in the world. Following the battle, Zaynab

³³ On Zainab as organizer of the first *majlis*, see Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam*, 50; Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 95-101; David Pinault, "Zaynab Bint Ali and the Place of the Women of the Households of the First Imams in Shi'ite Devotional Narratives," in Gavin R.G. Hambly, ed., *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pps. 69-98; and Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, & Everyday Practice*, 98-105.

was taken prisoner to Damascus, where she voiced the injustices and horror done to the family of the Prophet Muhammad at Karbala. For this, she embodies the ethics of being Husayni and is revered in Shi'i piety as, in the words of Karen Ruffle, an “imitable” saint. Husayn’s mother, Fatima al-Zahra, is a model Shi'i spouse and mother, serving as a paradigm of idealized womanhood. These women are remembered and celebrated in Shi'i poetics such as *marsiya* and the *nauha* that the women part of this study recite in every *ghar ki majlis*.

The assemblies known as the *ghar ki majlis* occur throughout the traditional ritual season of Muharram, occurring daily over two months and eight days. They may last over several hours or can be as short as twenty minutes. Women gather to recite poetry and engage in self-flagellation—the two chief components of these assemblies—always in front of the *imambarah* of the home. The *imambarah* is a room or an area within the home where the family relics related to commemorating Muharram are stored. Items in the *imambarah* include: the family Qur'an, a number of *alams* (a tall, silver battle standard that represents the martyrs of the battle), a tiny coffin to represent Husayn's daughter Sakina, family books of poetry recited during Muharram, and any offerings of food or drink given because the martyrs were denied food and water. During the ritual season the *imambarah* is cleaned daily, and is closed the rest of the year. Families that can afford to do so will construct a very large *imambarah*, sometimes nearly the size of an entire room; other families organize their relics in a corner of a room, in a box or shelf mounted to the wall.

These gatherings are the most intense during the first ten days of Muharram, corresponding to the ten days of the historical battle. One personality or event is remembered on each of those ten days; this focus is reflected in the specific poetics or ritual activities of the day. On the sixth day of Muharram the martyrdom of Husayn's eighteen-year old son Ali Akbar is

remembered and commemorated. This day is both a special and a painful one for the mothers in my community of mourners, as some of them have lost children of their own. The seventh day of Muharram is special for South Asian Shi'as because they believe that a wedding took place in Husayn's camp, between his daughter Fatima Kubra and her cousin Qasem.³⁴ The celebration is bittersweet however, because the next morning Qasem was martyred in battle. The night following the tenth day of Muharram, known as *Sham-e Gharibān*, is the day of an important women's *majlis* at the home of Sofia Nasir, my host during the two fieldwork periods and herself a prominent orator (*zakira*) who has led assemblies in Lucknow, in India, and in several American and European cities. It is believed that on this night, the survivors of the battle sat tired, hungry, and in loneliness, absorbed in sorrow for their loved ones martyred on the battlefield.

V: “Come, Please Come. It is Time”: A *Majlis* in Lucknow’s Ghazi Mandi

Tonight I arrived early at the home of Baaji (a title that means “older sister”), one of two senior women and leaders of our community. Her home is where our group always begins the nightly *ghar ki majlis* after the *maghrib namaz*.³⁵ There are four families that live in and share this huge complex—they are relatives of my host and community *zakira*, Sofia Nasir. Baaji, the matriarch of the home, is pacing the open room and suddenly calls for her daughter, Ariza: “Ariza, go call all the women and tell them it is time to start!” Ariza exits the house to the narrow lanes of the neighborhood and invites all to her home: “come, please come, it is time.” Slowly the women, many of them with small children, arrive and join us in the sitting room which also

³⁴ There are debates amongst Shi'i communities about whether this wedding in fact happened, although most South Asian Shi'as understand that it did occur. See Chapter five of Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, & Everyday Practice* for more on this debate.

³⁵ *Maghrib namaz* occurs at sunset.

houses the *imambarah* of these families. As we sit and wait for a quorum of sorts, the women are talking about the day's events; others are asking about family and friends. Sofia and Baaji stand near the *imambarah*, pouring over the several books of *nauha* (poetic dirges) to select which ones will be recited in the *majlis*. Sofia might also be finishing her namaz prayer near the front of the group.

Baaji looks around the room to see how many have arrived, and then checks the clock for the time. We go to thirteen homes in the neighborhood each night, so many are concerned to start on time so that the rituals don't go all evening. Usually it takes about four hours to finish visiting all the homes, although sometimes it has taken five to nearly six hours. That is because at some homes, we spend more time reciting more *nauha* or lingering longer after the *majlis*. At Baaji's home we usually spend thirty minutes and recite more poetry, whereas at some of the houses we spend about half of that time.

Baaji begins the *majlis*. She moves to be in the center of the group of women, all of us facing the *imambarah* itself. The first *nauha* is usually a little slow, and it is chosen because it establishes the themes for that day's *majlis*: Husayn and his family's arrival at the Karbala battlefield (2nd of Muharram), Qasem and Fatima Kubra's tragic wedding ceremony (7th of Muharram), or the sad and heroic story of Abbas attempting to fetch water for the thirsty children of Husayn (8th of Muharram). The structure of the *ghar ki majlis* is quite simple. One of the senior women—Baaji or Sofia, begins the ritual with the standard poem that is particular to the events remembered that day. She only needs to recite the first one or two lines before all present will join in. Next, one of the younger women will step to the front of the group and lead us in the recitation of three *nauha*; these are chosen at the purview of the lead reciter, and may be related to the events of that day or are more general in their theme. Depending on the time and the

general mood of the group, we will recite more *nauha* or we will end with the salutations to the martyrs of Karbala, the Shi'i Imams (divine leaders), and the Prophet Muhammad's family. As participants exit each home and move to the next, they are given a piece of food, a drink, or a gift that is called alternately *tabbaruk*, or *hissah* (literally, a piece).

On days that are particularly special, the rituals of the *ghar ki majlis* differ a bit from the usual form. On the sixth and seventh days of Muharram luxurious foods are prepared as offerings to those who we remembered on those days: Ali Akbar (6th of Muharram), and the wedding of Fatima Kubra and Qasem (7th of Muharram). On the night before Ashura (the 10th day of Muharram when Husayn was martyred), it is customary for Shi'as to remain awake throughout the night near the family's *imambarah*, reciting *marsiya* or *nauha* poetry. This night is called "Shab-e Bedari," or the evening of wakefulness. The *majlis* held on the evening of Ashura, called "Sham-e Gharibaan," (evening of the needy ones) is usually held in complete darkness. In Lucknow, Sofia Nasir hosts this special *majlis* and lectures on a particular topic, such as education or women's responsibilities.

The women that attend *ghar ki majlis* are of all ages—young, old, and in-between—many with children that range from being a few months old to teenagers. Some of the women are from established Lucknow Shi'i families, such as my host Sofia Nasir and her extended relatives, while others are the female maid-servants who belong to each home. There are several other women, along with their children, who participate in this community's gatherings but clearly do not belong to the extended families nor do they work in these homes. They stand in the back of the group, as if they are aware that they should not integrate themselves into the larger group. When I observe them during the *majlis* I can see that they are not familiar with the poetry nor do they perform the *matam* in time with the larger group. When I ask about who these women are, I

am told a few times that they are simply poor and come to the gatherings in order to receive the items distributed at each home once the rituals are finished. The act of gift-giving that ends each *majlis* ceremony is the primary way that women in my community interacted with this group of attendees. While this act could serve to shift socio-economic relationships amongst these women, it also serves as a method of marking boundaries and evaluating intention in ritual participation.

VI: Economies of the *Majlis*: The Ethics of Distributing Ritual Gifts

The discussion in Chapter One on the politics of space and place noted assumptions about what “belongs” in place and what is deemed “out” of place. In the context of heritage monuments in Delhi, what types of activities were understood as appropriate within protected spaces differed according to the producers of heritage walks, official institutions, and those who use these places for drinking and gambling. A similar process of setting boundaries occurs in the ritual setting of the *ghar ki majlis*, where religious expression intersects with socio-economic relationships and personal ethical judgement. Cleavages within women’s ritual participation are revealed through the act of distributing gifts called “*hissah*” at the end of each *majlis*. Understood as a moral action that pleases the Prophet Muhammad’s family and confers blessings on the giver, how women in Lucknow decide who should receive *hissah* and who should not reveals how their assumptions undermine the rhetorical force of Shi’i ethics and the supposed objectives of the *majlis* gathering.

Tonight after the first *ghar ki majlis* at Baaji’s home, Rizwana came to me as we were walking to the home of the next gathering. “Did you take your *hissah*?” she asked, looking at me expectantly. “No, I did not take it,” I started. She gave me a confused look, and I explained to her that I didn’t take my *hissah* because I didn’t need it. That night Baaji’s family gave out decorated

plastic trays—the type of tray that one would use to serve tea or snacks to guests. As I didn't see a personal need for this item, I thought it better to politely decline the offer so that someone else, who theoretically could use the tray, would receive it. I thought this was an appropriate and reasonable way of thinking about the dilemma that I faced often as I participated in the *ghar ki majlis*—how to respond to these gifts, which after attending thirteen different assemblies each night for nearly eleven nights, had accumulated in my small rented room.

Hissah, literally “portion” or “piece,” is the gift item that is distributed to each participant at the end of the *ghar ki majlis* by the women of the home in which the gathering was held. It is also called *tabarruk*, an Urdu word related to the Arabic *barak* (بَرَكَ), and is glossed as a blessing, benediction, or a portion of presents.³⁶ If an object is *tabarruk*, it contains divine blessings given to it by being in the presence of Husayn's family during the *majlis*. The items distributed as *hissah* varied from food items to household goods: salty snacks, juice boxes, boiled eggs, glassware, McDonald's vegetarian burgers, *sheermal* (the famous milky-sweet bread that Lucknow is famous for), and plastic serving trays as I mention above. When I discussed *hissah* with Sofia Nasir, she explained that in her opinion *hissah* should always be food or drink; it should be “something that can fill one's stomach.” I had heard rumors that the very rich Shi'i families give out very expensive items as *hissah*, such as refrigerators and televisions.

Distributing *hissah* is understood as an obligation and an honor by Shi'as during Muharram, however this practice also reciprocates existing socio-economic relationships because of assumptions held by the women who are in charge of giving away these items. The moral act of giving out *hissah* was sometimes complicated by the requests of the poor women and children who attended gatherings in my neighborhood. They were always there, right outside of the home,

³⁶ Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*, s.v. “Tabarruk,” 308.

waiting in the lane for women to emerge after the *majlis* with *hissah* in their hands. A group of young children, all boys, wearing dirty and torn clothes followed our group from home to home in hopes to also collect whatever items were given out that night. They never actually entered any of the homes; perhaps they had been scolded not to do so more than once. I remember when I first participated in these gatherings and emerged out of homes with snacks or wrapped food in my hands. Recognizing me as an outsider new to this scene, these children rushed to me, saying “*de do!*” (Give it!). Flustered and feeling sympathetic, I gave them whatever was in my hands. Later, one of the women came to me and scolded me for what I had done--she said by giving in, I was encouraging them to hound both myself and others for these items. These children had mothers who did attend many of the gatherings in our neighborhood. Once during my fieldwork, the presence of them and their children caused an argument amongst the women. Behind this tension lies differing positions on the role of proper conduct and intention when participating in the *ghar ki majlis*.

Tonight as usual, about halfway through the circuit of homes we made our way to the home of Ghazala, an exceptionally skilled *nauha* reciter with two young girls who seem to be enthusiastic about leading the poetry recitations at their home. I arrived early and sat on the carpet in front of the family *imambarah*, waiting for the others to arrive and the start of the *majlis*. Saba, a maid of one of the women in our group, arrived and sat next to me. I smiled at her in recognition that we were always the first to arrive, and usually the last to leave, the homes of our friends. After returning my smile Saba started to talk to me about the group of poor women and children, complaining that they follow us around and also disrupt the calmness of our gatherings when they are roughhousing outside. As Saba was speaking a few of the other women arrived and sat down with us; evidently she was not the only one who took issue with these

women and their children. I suddenly felt uncomfortable hearing these unfiltered comments critical of the people who clearly were not made to feel fully welcome in the homes of women in our group. Saba ended her criticism by remarking that some of the women are Sunni, which in her estimation meant that their participation in the *majlis* was under suspicion.

Complaints about these women and children had to stop temporarily, as Ghazala started reciting poetry and the *majlis* had begun. Saba continued to speak about them, however, at the next home as we waited to start the *majlis*. Sitting in front of Sofia Nasir's *imambarah*, Saba again loudly criticized these women for following the group around and expecting to get their *hissah* when they had not "earned" it. In order to get *hissah* it was required that you attend the *majlis*, but his rule does not apply to the sick or the elderly who were physically unable to attend. A few other women started chiming in with complaints when suddenly Baaji, standing in the center of the room with the book of *nauha* in her hand, lashed out at Saba and the others. "Stop, stop," she said sternly. Looking directly at Saba, Baaji scolded her for saying anything about these women and their children. She countered Saba's complaints by asking, "What it is to you, if they come and are given *hissah*?" Saba said nothing in return. That was the end of the women's critical comments about the poor women and children.

I was not the only person disturbed by the criticism towards these women who were clearly in need. In fact, they often would ask for an additional *hissah* if there were leftovers once each woman received their share. This was interpreted by some of the women, such as Saba, as their primary reason for attending the *ghar ki majlis*. Sughra, one of the women in our group, called it a misconception if others think these people only attend for the *hissah*. "They come because they want to listen to the *hadith* and the stories," she explained.³⁷ I am not sure whether

³⁷ A *hadith* / *hadis* is a report of the deeds and words of the Prophet Muhammad. For Twelver Shi'is, *hadis* include the customs of the twelve Imams.

Sughra heard that from any of the women themselves, but her opinion that these women are more than just needy is not shared by others whom I spoke with about the matter. When I asked Fatima about the presence of these women, she told me, “Some of the poor people have a shortage of food, and when they come here they receive food.” “Is that okay, in your opinion?” I pressed her. “It is absolutely okay. What is the point of *hissah*? People come and you give it out. It is distributed in the name of Imam Husayn. If there is someone in need, you give it to them. One should not leave the *majlis* empty handed (*khali haath*).” Saba’s comments revealed a skepticism of these people’s presumed material motivations to attend the neighborhood *ghar ki majlis*. For some of the women like Fatima, the intention of the recipient was not an issue because the act of giving was done in the name of faith and piety.

Debates about giving *hissah* to the poor women and children was more than a question of judging intention and demarcating borders of piety. I noticed that the women in our group often gave more than one *hissah* to their friends and close family members if there were extra portions leftover. This would not seem so surprising if not for the rule I heard repeated often when one of the poor women or children asked for another gift—one person, one *hissah*. “Is this right,” Sughra said to me in conversation about the *ghar ki majlis*. “when the poor ask for more, we say to them one *hissah* for one person. So why do we not follow that for our rich friends?” The ways in which women in the neighborhood distributed generously to their relatives and friends and were careful with what they gave to the needy show how the practice of giving *hissah* serves to replicate existing socio-economic relationships. The economies of the *ghar ki majlis* offer an opportunity to redistribute resources within the community of participants yet it is also a method of reciprocal giving. Critiques of the *majlis* as an ambivalent site marked by hypocrisy also identify how participation and context reproduce existing hierarchies instead of working to

transform them.³⁸ The irony that distributing gifts in the name of Husayn supports asymmetrical social relations is not the only paradox related to Muharram traditions. The *imambarah* has become a lavish display of wealth; the Shi'i families with more resources will construct and fill an entire room with large relics. Other families display their offerings to Husayn and his companions on a simple box mounted on a wall. Supporters of this institution note that the *majlis* is a hallmark of Shi'i generosity because anyone can attend and receive *hissah* at the end of the gathering. Private *majlis* assemblies such as the ones I was a part of in Lucknow are not as open to all, although they are not completely closed. The women in Lucknow allowed me to join them for every ritual that I wanted to attend. The difference between me and those whose attendance was frowned upon is that as an American researcher, my presence adds a sense of prestige to these women and their community.

The *ghar ki majlis* as a space of devotional ritual is also a context where values and intentions are judged, thus marking what types of activities are appropriate and which ones are not. Needy women in my Lucknow neighborhood were evaluated by some for the correctness of their intention and participation. This affected how generous (and not) Shi'i women were when they distributed gifts at the end of each gathering. Criticism of the poor women and children who stood in the streets as the *majlis* occurred undermines the spirit of ethics and social justice that are remembered so deeply during the month of Muharram. The practice of distributing *hissah* is connected to the ethics of being Shi'i because, as Fatima explained, Shi'i women give to others in the name of Imam Husayn. That ethic is in question when this gift-giving functions as an act of reciprocity between women of relatively similar socio-economic situations. Commenting on the situation of *hissah*, Sughra summed up the issue well: "If we understand that Imam Husayn

³⁸ See Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 56.

died for Islam, and Islam teaches us to give to those in need, we are doing exactly the opposite when we distribute more *hissah* to those who don't need it as much."

VII: Recitation that Puts Fear in Your Heart: Performance in the *Majlis*

The *ghar ki majlis* is more than simply a nightly gathering during which Shi'as recite poetry and remember the sacrifice and example of figures involved in the Karbala battle. It is a ritual that carries differing expectations about participation and performance amongst the women who attend. When asked to define a proper or correct (*sahih*) *majlis*, Shi'i women in Lucknow told me that the most important aspect of the ritual is that one participates "*dil se*," or from the heart. According to Ariza, "everyone needs to participate from the heart (*dil se manana chahiye*). It doesn't matter if you *matam* softly or intensely. If you sit down or you stand. If you smile or cry. It doesn't matter what colors of clothes you wear. None of this is the main matter, if one is doing it from the heart." This definition of participation construes outward performance with expectations of embodied sincerity. The *ghar ki majlis* is a ritualized setting where participants perform for and are evaluated by others, who judge them according to specific criteria which vary amongst women in the group. While they do not uniformly agree on what matters and what does not, women index acting "from the heart" in terms of outward emotional expression.

On the night of the sixth evening of Muharram, we begin the *ghar ki majlis* with the *nauha* (short poetic dirge) "*Akbar Ghar Chalo*" (*Akbar, Come Home*). Crowded in the small space in front of Sofia's Nasir's *imambarah*, tonight all the women seem more enthusiastic about their recitation, and several of the mothers in the room have red eyes from crying. Sofia is busy arranging and re-arranging the food items placed in the *imambarah* as offerings. Then she lights several candles in the small room. Finished, she wipes a tear from her eye and takes her place in the center of the standing women. She begins to recite a new *nauha*: "*Akbar Bare Javab Do*"

(*Answer Me, Akbar*). Her voice is loud, quaking, and powerful this night. Several of the other women have tears in their eyes, and many of the women who are also mothers are openly weeping. The concluding *matam* at this *majlis* is frenzied, emotional, and longer than usual nights. Once we finish, Sofia wipes her eyes and one by one, invites women to take some of the blessed food in the *imambara* (*nazar chukna*, literally to taste *nazar*, that which wards off evil).

Sofia's emotional performance on the sixth of Muharram heightens the emotions of the entire group. Women consistently identified her as their preferred leader of the *majlis*, and not simply because she brings a more somber tone to her participation. The women in my community index a participant's authenticity using several scales of emotional expression. Besides tone, another index of an emotional performance is how a participant engages in *matam* (beating the chest with one's hand), although opinions differ as to how this is connected to sincerity. Baaji connects this act with intention, describing it as a natural consequence of realizing the sorrow of what happened at Karbala: "If you realize what happened, then you will naturally do *matam*. One should not be showy when doing *matam*. The feeling should be from the inner heart." For other women part of the *ghar ki majlis*, *matam* is an exaggerated index of expression. Fatima explained that attending the *majlis* is not just about performing *matam*: "If one doesn't have the feelings, then one goes about the rituals laughing and smiling (haste haste). If one performs the rituals with emotion, then one will be very quiet (*khamoshi se*). The mourning of Imam Husayn was so much that one must cry. One doesn't even need to do that much *matam*. So it is possible that the only necessary part are tears." These women differ on the importance of performing *matam* in the *majlis* ritual but they both index sincerity in terms of how a participant displays their emotions. For Fatima, smiling or laughing in a context that is somber is a marker of insincerity. Baaji assumes that the natural consequence of hearing the

stories of what happened at Karbala will produce an emotional performance of grief.

Another determination of emotive expression valued by women is an emotive tone and correct pronunciation in poetic recitation part of the ritual. When I asked women in our group whose *nauha* recitation they preferred the most, nearly all of them named Sofia, or Sofia Apa, as she is affectionately called. One woman explained her preference for Sofia's ritual performances by describing her delivery as one that was done “*josh se*,” or with enthusiasm. Another aspect of her delivery noted by many was her style of pausing deliberately for emotional affect. Her vocal intonation, pauses, and rhythm all compromise her unique style of recitation that, in the words of several women, made one tear up on the spot. As one in our group said to me, “Apa's reading puts fear (*darr*) in your heart. Just listening to her...the tears come on their own (*khud ba khud*). Amongst our group another woman, Ghazala, was mentioned by several as a preferred reciter of *nauha*. Sughra explained that she prefers Ghazala's performance of poetry because of her vocal intonations and sincere posture when she reads. Like Sofia, Ghazala's competency is indexed in terms of both her competency in recitation and the nature of her emotional tone when reading in front of the women.

How women in the *ghar ki majlis* recite this poetry and how others evaluate them is similar to performance of other Muharram poetic genres in South Asia. Amy Bard's study of women's *marsiya* recitation in Lucknow explains how the literature, “bounded yet malleable,” is deployed using lexical and topical choice, tune selection, and is shaped by the backgrounds of performers and in interactions between audiences and reciters.³⁹ Bard finds that for some women, evaluation of *marsiya* recitation counters “skill against authentic feeling;” skill for her

³⁹ Amy Bard, “Desolate Victory: Shi'i Women and the Marsiyah Texts of Lucknow” (Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 2002), 268.

reciters is often judged by devotional intensity, familiarity, or an index of expertise defined by how “poet-like” performers are.⁴⁰ Women are looking for a performance that strikes them as authentic, yet they index what is genuine using a standard that is similar to a lyricist, which is itself a type of performance. How emotion, devotional intensity, and sincerity are markers of an authentic performance assumes that these outward expressions indicate a truth about inner feelings and dispositions. Using a framework of performance casts doubt on the exact translation of inner states to outer manifestations. Anna Gade’s (2004) study of long-term projects of self-cultivation through Qur’anic recitation forefronts the role of affect and emotion in projects of Indonesian Muslim self-cultivation in the mid to late 1990s. Her approach to the idea of “affect” constructs the concept of emotion as separate from both cognition and embodiment.⁴¹ There is doubt as to whether the outward expression seen and evaluated in contexts of devotional performance is, or should be, understood as a translation of inner dispositions. Yet the attempt at recognizing sincerity and intention remains a question of deciphering what may be conveyed through embodied actions.

As Fatima mentioned above, producing tears is a primary emotional scale used to index ritual sincerity, and one that in many ways defines the *majlis* gathering itself. This emotional act is also understood as soteriological: Shi’as believe that Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and mother of Husayn, will intercede for those who shed tears in the *majlis*.⁴² One of the women part of my community explained why it is important to cry in the *ghar ki majlis*:

We believe that Fatima Zahra (the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and the mother of Husayn) attends the *majlis* before we arrive. When we shed our tears, Fatima Zahra is at peace

⁴⁰ Ibid., 294.

⁴¹ Anna Gade, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 50-52.

⁴² Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, & Everyday Practice*, 159.

(*sukoon milta hai*). Because when Imam Husayn was martyred there was no one at his side. And his sister and daughter—if they shed even one tear for him, they would be punished. Water was not given to them; neither was food given—everything was withheld. If they wanted to cry in remembrance of Imam Husayn, or because of their thirst and hunger, they were severely violated (*tashadud karna*).

Not everyone cries at every *majlis* gathering, however. Attitudes differ as to the importance of crying, and how that is related to ritual sincerity or is not. Ariza questions the emphasis on tears and rejects how they are evaluated by others: “one doesn’t cry in order to show crying to others. Being sad is proof (*sabit*) enough. One just needs to be mournful (*gham manana*) for Imam Husayn. Any way that one is sad is an okay way.” Participants are not in agreement on how crying is an index of grief for the Karbala martyrs, and Ariza’s comment about showing off indicates that for some, it is simply a matter of performance.

How Shi’i mourners act in the *majlis*—how they seem to be able to cry on cue, how they engage in self-flagellation—has been the focus of many analyses of contemporary Shi’i piety. David Pinault’s research in South Asia includes Shi’i voices critical of how, at male gatherings, attention to the “sermon” is sacrificed in order to allow for more time to do *matam*.⁴³ Pinault describes wonder at how some Shi’as participate in “ritualized grief,” going from one *majlis* to another, seemingly able to simply turn on sorrowful emotions.⁴⁴ This critical view implies a lack of emotional investment if one can produce such emotion on command. In his study of ritual tears and Shi’i gatherings, Gary Ebersole criticizes analyses of crying in religious studies that are deterministic and narrowly interpret this emotional response as a reflection of grief and sorrow. Crying is “symbolic currency in a moral economy,” Ebersole argues, and thus the task of the researcher is to go beyond grief and explore how crying as an expression may be also be socially

⁴³ Pinault, *The Shi’ites*, 149.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 147-151.

and politically symbolic.⁴⁵ If this action carries “symbolic currency” in a ritualized context then it follows that the act of *not* crying also signifies meaning and value within the *majlis*. Women who do not always cry at *ghar ki majlis* gatherings do not agree that this act defines their ritual sincerity. Thus the significance of not crying indicates a rejection of how others may define their participation as sincere or not.

There are other ways that women in Lucknow defied group expectations, and it was only by going “backstage” in Goffman’s sense of the term that I uncovered ambivalence in terms of how the nature of participation measures one’s sincerity. Most women do not cover their head with a scarf for the entire *ghar ki majlis*; they will pull it over their heads only during the closing words of the *salavāt*, or the verbal blessings conferred on the Prophet Muhammad and his family that close every *majlis* ritual. Some of the women wear a headscarf for the duration of the gathering and not simply at the end. Sughra is one such person who covers during every *majlis*, and I asked her to explain her opinion on why she makes this choice. “We cover our heads in the mosque,” she started, “so why not also in front of Imam Husayn (as Shi’as believe happens in the *majlis*)?” I asked Sughra if she raised this matter with other women in our group. She told me that some of the older women agree with her. They also claim that “no one listens” when they are asked to cover for the gathering. Because the *ghar ki majlis* happens within the home, many women do not wear a headscarf and understand it as a matter of choice. Others like Sughra interpret this choice as an indication of one’s regard for Husayn and as a measure of honoring his presence at the *majlis*.

How Shi’as discuss change in the *majlis* gathering also indicates conflicting attitudes about expectations and emotional performance in the *majlis*. Qazi Asad, one of the more popular

⁴⁵ Gary L. Ebersole, “The Function of Religious Weeping Revisited: Affective Expression and Moral Discourse,” in *History of Religions* 39:3 (2000), pps. 211-246; 245.

young *marsiya* reciters (*marsiya-go*) in Lucknow, explained to me how the *majlis* has changed as a context for learning manners and for creating community:

Parents used to tell their children, “Go to the *majlis* and learn culture!” This is called *majlisi tehzeeb* (culture of the *majlis* gathering). How to sit properly, how to interact with elders properly—all this people learned in the *majlis*. But for today's generation, things are very different. Boys don't talk to girls, siblings don't talk to their other siblings, or their house relatives. Time for today's young people is totally taken up by tasks: going to school, then going to coaching, meeting with friends, Facebook, laptop, television. What does all this mean? That Shi'i culture—Awadh culture—Urdu culture—that culture was defined by people coming together to sit as one community. Festivals, *matam*, *marsiya*, all happened as one community. Now everything has become separated (*sab alag ho giya*).

Other Shi'as share Qazi's opinions about what constitutes appropriate behavior and lament how Shi'i youth today do not follow “correct” custom. When I asked Sofia Nasir if she thought that the *majlis* had changed, she elaborated on many shifts in custom, appearance, and attitude.

“There used to be a lot of respect. People used to conduct themselves with respect, with manners. It did not matter if you were poor (*gharib*), or wealthy (*amir*). At the *majlis*, not one person laughed, or had a smile come to their lips. Children sat on the carpet (*farsh*) with respect and were quiet. Today, everything is the opposite. People are only interested in completion (of the rituals).” In their assessment of ritual change, Shi'as identify what constitutes proper emotional expression—silence and a somber attitude—and equates the outward performance of these inner emotional states with correct devotional behavior.

Fatima echoed Sofia's observations and criticized the younger generation on the particular practice of *matam*: “I remember in my childhood...my grandmother. When she arrived at the *majlis* suddenly everyone fell silent (*khamoosh*), no one smiled or laughed. And she cried a lot. One had the feeling that someone had died (*koi mar gaye ho*). Today, everyone does the *matam* too quickly. Then they quickly go to the next house for *matam* and *majlis*.” Her index of proper ritual participation is associated with the length of performed action and emotional *matam*. When I asked these women to explain why things had changed, they mentioned various

phenomenon associated with contemporary life: mothers are working outside of the home and do not spend as much time with their children, parents are concerned about schooling and getting their children into the best schools at a very early age, everyone is worried about regular employment (*roozgār*).

I observed a spectrum of emotional expressions as a participant in the *ghar ki majlis*. I heard often from older women that it used to be that during the two month and eight-day mourning period of Muharram, women would refrain from any new clothes, from wearing *kajol* (black eye liner), and from wearing any jewelry. Today, many Shi'a younger women ask their parents for new Muharram clothes at the start of the commemorative season. Sughra believes that some women attend the *ghar ki majlis* just to show off newly purchased clothing, which in her estimation is “sad.” Not all women go without makeup and many wear other colors in addition to black during this time. I also noticed moments of laughter and overheard women gossiping during the *ghar ki majlis*. Some older women in my community faulted others, usually younger, for their incorrect pronunciation when reciting Urdu poetry. Many of these women do not read the Urdu script, which does not completely preclude their participation because nearly all the poetic texts are published in the Hindi script. Several handwrite these Urdu poems in personal notebooks in Hindi. In the process of translating from Urdu to Hindi, nuances of elocution were sometimes left untranslated. Lack of an education in Urdu meant that occasionally the younger girls did not know the correct pronunciation of words considered part of the Urdu vocabulary. While Shi'as of an older generation blame youth and insincerity as the reasons why women do not conform to their expectations of behavior, differing ideas about propriety and intention indicate ambivalence within the community about what constitutes sincerity in ritual participation.

Examining the rituals of the *ghar ki majlis* using the language of performance reveals inconsistencies in expectations about what constitutes sincerity and correct participation. For some the act of crying is an essential act to express solidarity with the cause of Husayn and his companions at the injustices they suffered. This expression also has salvific consequences, yet not all women share the opinion that crying is a “natural” reaction upon hearing the sad stories of Karbala that indicates one’s sincerity. Expressing grief through beating one’s chest as an index of intention is also a matter of debate for women in Lucknow, and in other South Asian Shi’i communities.⁴⁶ What is included as appropriate personal comportment in this ritual setting differs within this community; for some, one should keep a somber and quiet tone while for others chatter about interpersonal relations is allowed, as is non-conformity to other’s expectations.

Practices associated with the *majlis*, like *matam* and weeping from grief, are held in varying degrees of importance by Shi’i women in Lucknow. What is clear from my discussions about what constitutes a correct *ghar ki majlis* is that while there is no consensus on the particulars, participants evaluate how others act and emote in this ritual setting. If the true criterion for participation is that it be from the heart, then it follows that there would not be concern with evaluating practice and coming to conclusions about sincerity. That the women identify intent as the main factor in ritual participation seems paradoxical, because sincerity and intention are subjective concepts. Importance placed on proper participation in terms of individual sincerity is seemingly at odds with how that intention is measured as an outward expression of emotion, or in other words, as a performance. Yet these emotional and expressional aspects of the ritual gatherings are not the only reasons for participation. There is an

⁴⁶ Akbar Hyder describes several positions within debates on proper *matam* for South Asian Shi’as. See Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 52-55.

important educational purpose ascribed to the *majlis*; it is a ritual context where Shi'as not only learn how to be proper Shi'as or Muslims, but also how their faith informs citizenship.

VIII: “I am Husayni”: Shi'i Ethics of *Ibadaat and Insaniyyat* (Devotion and Humanity) in the *Majlis*

Participating in the *ghar ki majlis* involves more than performances of ritualized expression of grief and solidarity with Husayn and his companions. For many Shi'as, the *majlis* is a place where attendees can acquire important cultural, ethical, and religious knowledge. The kinds of learning that operate within this ritual setting inform how Shi'i women in Lucknow fashion ideas of self-understanding related to the multiple social roles they take as women, mothers, and spouses. The information which is conveyed in the *majlis* is not limited towards encouraging acts of personal self-cultivation and relations within the Shi'i community. These gatherings seek to educate all who attend—Muslims and non-Muslims—in the ethical example of Husayn and how to operate in wider society informed by “Husayni ethics.”

Episodes from Shi'i history form the foundation of knowledge and learning in the *majlis*. In public gatherings, the *zakir* or *zakira* narrates the events of Karbala specific to that day, focusing on the details of each personalities' actions and the moments of their martyrdom. This may be followed by the recitation of poems which are also based on the events particular to the history of the day. Some orators are criticized for playing “fast and loose” with history, while others do not judge if there is an element of exaggeration in presentation. Description of the day's events is often followed by a lecture that is usually related to contemporary issues such as social life, education, how children should treat their parents and how spouses should treat spouses, and in a post-9/11 context, the “Islamic” nature of global terrorism and Shi'i responses

to it.⁴⁷ Education happening in the *majlis* is often not associated with the historical Karbala event; new knowledge is found in these lectures about contemporary and religious matters. Attending the *majlis* “is like a school” explained Kyoko, the Japanese daughter-in-law of Baaji and a convert to Shi’ism. To illustrate her point, Kyoko recalled a recent public *majlis* where one of the topics spoken about was male and female rights at the time of signing the marriage contract (*nikahnama*). Kalbe Jawad, a leading Shi’i figure in Lucknow, explained that Muslim women have the right to refuse the marriage contract on their own accord. This was something that she, and many of the other women sitting with her, were not aware was a possibility.

The *majlis* is a space where Shi’as believe that values such as behavior towards oneself and others, and codes of social conduct, are expressed. Its functions go beyond ritualized expressions of grief, as Baaji made clear to me that, “the *majlis* is not only for weeping and crying. Not only for *matam*.” When I pressed her to tell me what else happens in these gatherings, she connected learning how to practice Islam with participating in the *majlis*:

One learns the etiquette (*adab*) of the *majlis*, how to sit properly, and proper behavior (*tameez*). How to live, how to speak, how to behave, how to take care of your neighbors and your guests. This is a good question you’ve asked! One learns to obey your parents and pay respect to your elders. How to read the Qur'an, how to do *namaz*—basically, how one follows Islam. If we do not do this, then the *majlis* is useless (*bekaar*).

The functions that these gatherings may serve for her are related to learning “correct” behavior, which is a large assumption given diversity of opinion within the community about what exactly is included within this category of conduct. However, Baaji’s conceptualization of how participating in the *majlis* is edifying identifies how this setting facilitates aspects of personality formation and ethical disposition is similar to studies of the notion of *adab* in South Asian

⁴⁷ During Muharram in 2015, many Shi’i leaders in Lucknow denounced the terrorism and violent events in the Middle East connected to *Daesh*, or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (known as ISIL or ISIS). I heard many times in *majlis* lectures that Daesh is our present-day “Yazid,” the villain of the Karbala narrative.

Islam.⁴⁸ While the *majlis* is a site for the communication of Shi'i values, it is certainly not also a space for debate and discussion. Listeners who agree or are moved by what is said by orators raise their voices in response; often-repeated slogans that express agreement are: "Ya Ali!" (Oh, Ali!) or "Allah-hu Akbar" (Allah is great). The option to voice dissent in this setting is not given public sanction.

The *majlis* is also a space for the expression of ethical Shi'ism, or as defined by Shi'as in Lucknow, for articulations of what it means to be "Husayni." This concept first came to my attention through posters placed all over the Chowk area of Lucknow during Muharram, featuring the faces of Shi'a men and women as well as the statement, "I am Husayni." I heard this declaration, and its connotations, within the context of a public *majlis* given by Maulana Kalbe Jawad in the *imambarah* known as Gufran Ma'ab. During his lecture (*khutbah*) on the third day of Muharram in 2015, Jawad mentioned several issues that I had heard him reflect on before: Sunni and Shi'i relations, the worldwide persecution of Shi'as, and strict condemnation of the group known as ISIS (Jawad referred to them as *Daesh*). Nearly halfway through his comments, Jawad explained what it entailed to call oneself "Husayni": "simply stepping and sitting on the *minbar* (pulpit) does not make one a Husayni. One's character (*kirdaar*) and actions ('*amal*) must also be Husayni."⁴⁹ Jawad's assertion here criticizes the hypocrisy of those who outwardly perform their commitment to Husayni ethics, while not truly integrating this

⁴⁸ Barbara Metcalf's edited volume on *adab* as a notion of civilized behavior that incorporates Islamic values, education, and social conduct in South Asian Islam. These essays cover classical ideas of the term in Sufi source materials, alternatives to its influence, and *adab* as associated the education of Muslim women. See Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984).

⁴⁹ See the lead article in the Urdu language *Awadhnama Daily* on October 19, 2015 that references this *majlis* and Jawad's statement. URL: <http://awadhnama.com/index.php?edition=Lucknow%20Urdu&date=2015-10-19&p=3> (Accessed October 19, 2015).

disposition in all spheres of their interactions with others.

The emphasis that Jawad and the Shi'i community place on the idea of being Husayni is an ethical model based on intent, practice, and action to work against all cruelty and to promote social justice in the world. The women in my community connect Husayni ethics to the manifold ways that education occurs in the *ghar ki majlis*. This disposition is learned in a ritualized, religious context but it does not remain there. Ethics as a Husayni are not limited to how one behaves in ritual gatherings, nor to relations within the Shi'i community. Husayni ethics are guidelines for social relationships with Muslims and non-Muslims, and non-Muslims can also be considered "Husayni." While I first encountered this in Lucknow, Shi'as in other South Asian contexts describe a similar disposition that Karen Ruffle, working with Indian Shi'as in Hyderabad, terms "*husainiyaat*."⁵⁰ In Ruffle's conceptualization this idea signifies the attempt to embody the moral and ethical qualities of the *ahl-e bayt* (literally, "people of the house," it denotes the family of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima). Her outline of *husainiyyat* notes that to an extent this way of being is culturally specific; indeed, Lucknow women add some nuance to their concept of ethical Shi'ism. My discussions in Lucknow build upon Ruffle's description of Shi'i ethics with details on how Lucknowi women define being Husayni as upholding both aspects of devotion (*ibadaat*), and honoring humanity (*insaniyaat*).

The first pillar of Husayni ethics is *ibadaat*, which connotes devotional action. It includes those considered as aspects of broader Muslim practice, such as performing *namaz*, going on the Hajj pilgrimage, giving *zakat*, and keeping the Ramadan fast (*saum*). For Shi'as, women mentioned actions such as participating in the *majlis*, as well as doing *ziyarat* (literally,

⁵⁰ Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, & Everyday Practice*, 50-51.

“visitation” or pilgrimage to sacred sites and tombs) and *azadari* (the spectrum of rituals and performances part of Muharram) during Muharram as aspects of *ibadaat*. It also means that one accepts the divine leaders of Shi’ism, including ‘Ali, Husayn, and the concept of the Imamate. The second pillar of Husayni ethics is the idea of recognizing humanity, or “*insaniyyat*,” in relations with others. In her position as the leader (*zakira*) of women’s gatherings, Sofia Nasir always emphasized the duty to respect others, no matter their religion, caste, or social position. She often asked a rhetorical question of her audiences: “If one does not wear the clothes (*libaas*) of humanity, then how can one know how to love a fellow human?” Her point is that respecting the innate humanity of others is more than merely talk—it is a matter of personal action. Love and respect of others, no matter their religion or nationality, is part of what it means to be Husayni. Indeed, one need not necessarily be Shi’a, nor Muslim, in order to be considered a Husayni. Sughra explained to me that Shi’i ethics goes beyond partisanship and is applicable to persons of any faith: “This is more than being Muslim. Non-Muslims can be Husayni too. If they are good to others, if they are doing something constructive for humanity or for mankind. They are Husayni too. Standing up for the weak, for justice—this is what it means to be Husayni.” Sughra’s comment that anyone can be a Husayni can be read in two contradictory ways: it is at once an inclusive move, and at worst an example of what might be termed Shi’i chauvinism. Nevertheless, the emphasis that Shi’as place on these twin pillars of ethics, and their horizon of participation in the ideal of being Husayni, is a key aspect of Shi’i practice and expression in the *majlis* today.

How Shi’as broaden the idea of Husayni ethics as a respect for humanity informs how they understand their identities as Muslims, and as Indians. Shi’i values include respect and care for others, no matter their self-affiliation or background. Baaji related the idea of *insaniyyat* as

another part of what is learned in the *majlis*:

We learn how to approach people from different countries, from different castes. They are our guests. We are told that if you care (*pyaar karna*) for each and every person—from your religious community or not—they will follow your example. So there is also a feeling of patriotism. You may be a foreigner, but I know how to behave with you. This I have learned from Islam. First be a human, then be a Muslim, then be a Shi'a."

The education that one receives through the *majlis* is not simply a matter of personal growth, as many Shi'as connect that learning to the progress of not only the Shi'i community, but the Muslim global community (*ummah*). In her hierarchy of what Islam teaches, Baaji emphasizes respect for all of humanity, respect for all other Muslims, and finally respect for fellow Shi'i Muslims. She also positions the educational functions of the *majlis* in terms of personal progress and nation-building. "Behavior, customs—we are taught all this in the *majlis*," Baaji explained. "You must have a good education, so that we can progress. So that our family can progress. So that our country can progress." Her opinions here show how Shi'as connect their ritual actions with ways of being that seem far removed from the ritual context. The education happening in the *majlis* serves purposes beyond strengthening Shi'i community bonds and fostering a Shi'i identity. Baaji connects the socio-ethical education learned within the *majlis* to not only her personal development, but also to the progress of the Indian nation. Hers is a Muslim voice that constructs her religious identity as linked to her identity as an Indian citizen.

In Lucknow, as much as there is a discourse of what it means to be Husayni in today's world, there is also a critique of Muslim hypocrisy, and especially of Muslims who engage in acts of violence in the name of Islam. Like Kalbe Jawad's statement about needing to be ethical in words and deeds, some Shi'as are critical of those they interpret as being Husayni more in words than in actions. Sofia reflected on the need to go beyond simply speaking as if one was a Husayni:

Simply in language, in words, there is no concept of being Husayni. One must understand the

philosophy, the literature, the intentions of being Husayni. Why did Husayn accept his martyrdom at the battle of Karbala? The history, the philosophy, of Karbala — the intention (*maqsad*), one must understand all of this. Why did Husain arrive at Karbala? What was the purpose of Husayn and his companions going to Karbala? Husayn shed his blood to save Islam, so that Islam would not have to shed its blood.

Many of the Shi'as I spoke with in Lucknow feel that terrorism waged in the name of Islam and the Muslim community threatened how Shi'i ethics were understood, and how Shi'as and other Muslims feel about these acts of violence. Baaji was particularly pointed in her criticism of these actors: "When one is not a human, then how can they be a Shi'a? What are today's terrorists doing? How many people have they murdered? This has nothing to do with the work of Husayn. It is not possible for them to be Husayni. Husayni means that you would sacrifice your own life. Not take the lives of others." Criticism of contemporary global terrorism—especially that which is committed by other Muslims—was consistently part of informal conversation and part of official public lectures during 2014 and 2015 Muharram. It is an ethical, and critical, Muslim voice that is unfortunately often absent in non-Muslim and international media coverage of events of social violence.

Religious ritual is not simply the presentation of a socio-ethical worldview, as Clifford Geertz described; rather, rituals provide methods of acting in the world that informs the full social experiences of participants, not simply their religious experiences.⁵¹ That the ethics of being Husayni are connected to participation in the *majlis* shows how the content of devotional ritual has influence beyond its intended context. The expectation that one will learn how to uphold the Shi'i ethic of *insaniyyat*—respecting humanity—through the *majlis* means that in these religious rituals, Shi'i men and women are being ethically cultivated in their relations with society beyond the devotional community. Shi'i ethics learned and embodied in Shi'i ritual have

⁵¹ See Geertz, "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 126-141.

influence in the social worlds of secular, national society because they provide guidelines for proper behavior with all of humanity.

Conclusion: Shi'i Voices and the Question of Muslim Belonging

The ritual setting of the women's *ghar ki majlis* provides insight onto several dimensions of contemporary Shi'i experience, including socio-economic relationships, the performative aspects of ritual activity, debates on ways of acting and expressing in ritual, and the contours of Shi'i ethics as a pairing of dual emphases on humanity and worship. The purposes and outcomes of *majlis* participation are not always clear nor as effective as some may understand them. Changes in the *majlis* ritual, such as the desire to complete the gathering faster, or how younger Shi'i women relate to traditional expectations of mourning style, indicate that participants bring differing assumptions to what constitutes appropriate ritual actions. Like other examples of space and place associated with Muslim histories in the chapters that follow, the *majlis* is an ideological space inflected with different meanings according to the assumptions held by those who interact there. Considering how the *majlis* also is an example of the politics of space and place draws attention to how some women draw boundaries of participation: intention matters for inclusion. Others part of that same space contest this definition of proper use of the *majlis*; evidence of the nature of "off-stage" discourse on practice and ethics for Shi'i women.

The conclusion that Muslims are a national anxiety for the Indian nation does not apply to how Muslim women in Lucknow understand their place in culture and society. The question of whether it is possible to be Muslim and also Indian is non-existent for Shi'i men and women, who describe the concept of Husayni as an example for operating within their community and in broader social relations. This Muslim voice in performance assumes their place in the Indian nation, and relates that role to the socio-ethical character of their faith commitment. Like Hindu

and Muslim characters in Munshi Premchand's *Karbala*, Shi'i women in Lucknow are inspired by ethical Shi'ism as they participate in greater Indian society. While Premchand's play is relegated to the shelves of libraries and bookstores, Shi'i women live out their self-understandings as Muslim and Indian every day, in private and public spaces. Their performance is the embodiment of a Muslim self that is also an Indian citizen, and sees no dissonance between the two. It is in sharp contrast to historical performances of north Indian Muslim rulers that are presented in monuments and on stages in Delhi today, where Muslims from the past are performed and evaluated on their loyalty to India, their ethical decisions in terms of governance, and their treatment of non-Muslim communities part of their polity. Skepticism of Muslim belonging is what prompts these figures from Delhi's past to voice their rejoinders to how history, and contemporary society, questions their relationship to the Indian nation.

Chapter Three

Heritage and Representation in Performances of Delhi's Medieval Past: The Madness of Muhammad bin Tughlaq

The writing of history is not the monopoly of professional historians alone.¹

---Sunil Kumar, *The Present in Delhi's Past*

Introduction: Delhi's Muslim Heritage

The question of Muslim belonging takes on a spatial and material dimension when this issue is examined through the study of performances conducted in historical spaces in Delhi connected with Muslim histories. At present, the neglected state of many of these monuments indicates that they—like Indian Muslims—do not have a place in either Delhi's revered past, nor in the future progress of the Indian nation. The Archaeological Survey of India (hereafter, ASI), the official state organization mandated with the conservation and the preservation of selected monuments around the country, does little to prevent the deterioration of buildings in Delhi constructed during the era of Muslim political power in north India (tenth to mid-nineteenth century).² Heritage tourism in Delhi today operates in many of these same spaces as part of local efforts to showcase the city's unique history. One such organization, Darwesh, has created several heritage walks which take place in these spaces and revisit their histories and personalities through performance. Their historical performance walk based on the life of the Muslim sovereign Muhammad bin Tughlaq (ruled 1325-1351) takes place in the fort constructed

¹ Sunil Kumar, *The Present in Delhi's Past: Five Essays*. 2nd ed. (Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2011), xi.

² The Red Fort (Lal Qila), a major tourist attraction in Delhi, is an exception to what is otherwise a broad state disregard towards upkeep of forts and mosques built at this time.

at his order, and a nearby mosque. The walk is a dynamic setting of interactions between guides who present historical narratives and provide background information on the monument, an actor who interrupts the presentation and performs the figure of Tughlaq, and nearly simultaneous participant questions and feedback.

Heritage tourism in Delhi constructs historic spaces with social meaning and economic value that is often at odds with how others, including the Archaeological Survey of India (hereafter ASI), understand these same places. Conflicting social meanings given to space and place result in ambiguous encounters and occasionally are challenges to the objectives of the tourism industry. The Darwesh team aims to recover forgotten local histories, and intends to cultivate social responsibility and local stewardship over the neglected sites that are included in their work. In context of post-independence and post-Partition Delhi, these objectives are also political because many of these neglected stories and monuments are connected to Muslim pasts and Muslim presents. Their efforts to recover a Muslim past in heritage walks based on Tughlaq conceive of the pre-modern personality as enlightened yet mad; reckless yet progressive in some of his decisions. These performances forefront his supposed eccentricities and irrational behavior, thus conjuring orientalist stereotypes of Muslim rulers as the despotic and illogical other. Although in performance, Tughlaq has a voice and responds to how historiography has judged him as a “mad genius,” the emphasis on his conflicted personality results in an ambivalent representation of a complex and storied figure in Indian history. Despite the opportunity that heritage walk performances present to critically address the erasure of pre-modern Muslim histories to contemporary north Indian cultural life, stereotypical representations undermine any progressive potential, and ensure that Muslims remain in the separate category of “other.”

darwesh
Presents

THE MAD GENIUS, MUHAMMAD BIN TUGHLAQ

A theatre walk exploring the life and times of
Muhammad-bin Tuglaq inside the ruins of JAHANPANAH

Set in the fourth walled city of Delhi, JAHANPANAH which was constructed by the second Tuglaq Emperor Mohammad-bin-Tuglaq, the walk will involve exploring the fascinating remains of this city and sharing stories from the enthralling life of Mohammad-bin Tuglaq. The storytelling will be interspersed with a captivating theatrical performance by trained theatre actor, giving a glimpse into the dual life of one the most visionary Emperors of India.

Contribution: 950.00 INR/ person (couple and group discounts available)
Contact: Yuveka Singh | +91-9818813387 | contact@darwesh.in

DATE: Date: Sunday, 8th February 2015 | START TIME: 10.30am | END TIME: 12.45 pm
VENUE: Opposite Sarvapriya Vihar Club
MEETING POINT: Outside Hauz Khas metro station under pass, Opposite Laxman Public School.

Note: the Walk will be conducted in English and theatre performance will be conducted in Urdu and Persian, however the narrator will be translate the dialogues into English.

Fig. 3.1 Darwesh publicity for the “Mad Genius” performance walk

I: On Space, Place, and Representation

The pre-modern places in Delhi where Darwesh heritage walks are performed are more than simply a location where a medieval monument remains. They are also a space where pre-modern Muslim histories and personalities are performed and consumed by the audience of walk participants. Place in this sense is not simply an empty location; rather, it is a space where identity construction, performance, and politics intersect and are experienced by all part of the walk. Scholars of social and cultural geography have theorized space and place beyond the core argument that space is socially constructed. Yi-Fu Tuan conceptualizes “space” and “place” as interdependent: space is “that which allows movement; then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place”.³ Space begins as an “undifferentiated” concept which becomes “place” as it becomes known and is endowed with value.⁴ The users of monumental spaces in Delhi associated with Muslim histories endow those places with diverse values, revealed in how they use the same space differently. These variations are based in expectations about what is appropriate and not appropriate in the usage of space. To judge certain activities as not correct within a place or space is an example of transgression. Tim Cresswell argues that paying attention to moments of transgression in place exposes ideological assumptions about what activities belong—and do not belong—in those locations.⁵ His discussion of the ideological use of place emphasizes how it is used to both affirm normative views and to question the logic behind those assumptions.⁶

³ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Tim Cresswell, *In Place / Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

⁶ Ibid., 9.

Space and place are also sites that participate in ideological strategies of representation.

Henri Lefebvre was one of the first theorists to apply a Marxist reading to the politics of space and place, particularly in terms of how socially marginalized groups utilize space for political action. He associated these “spaces of representation” specifically with “the clandestine or underground side of social life.”⁷ Revisions to Lefebvre’s work go beyond the dualism inherent in his conceptualization of counterspace and representation. David Harvey emphasizes the materiality of place and the dialectic nature of ideological processes related to space: “there is a politics to place construction ranging dialectically across material, representational, and symbolic activities which find their hallmark in the way in which individuals invest in places and thereby empower themselves collectively by virtue of that investment.”⁸ Edward Soja’s concept of “Thirdspace” emphasizes the “radical openness” and ever-changing possibility that space offers, not simply to marginalized groups. His conceptualization emphasizes instantaneous processes that make Thridspace a space of “critical exchange”: Thirdspaces are simultaneously material and mental, or real and imagined.⁹ Soja’s approach describes space and place as continuously expanding, the unending product of collaborations and negotiations between materiality and mental or cultural constructions.¹⁰

Theorists of space and place in terms of politics and representation emphasize how actors

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith trans. (Oxford; Cambridge, MA.: Blackwell, 1991), 33; 39.

⁸ David Harvey, “From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity,” in Jon Bird et al., eds., *Mapping the Futures: Local Culture, Global Change* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), pps. 3-29; 24.

⁹ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Spaces* (Cambridge, MA.: Blackwell, 1996), 11.

¹⁰ Ibid.

create value and specific meaning that reflects, and questions, normative socio-cultural assumptions. Space is not an empty location inhabited in disinterested ways by multiple users; rather, it is a socially-constructed concept that reveals aspects of a culture or society's ideology as well as attempts to contest those socio-political terms. Place has a material dimension that is not only literal, but also constructed, and figures into how that space is ideologically represented. Darwesh's presentations within medieval monuments assign new meaning to these historical spaces, which mediates in how they are known both in history and in contemporary social life. They are not the only users of these spaces, however, and their agenda to conduct historical walks is often in conflict with locals who understand the same place in different ways. How the Darwesh team puts a heritage performance walk together is a combination of intentional processes, changing local conditions, and the result of intersecting attitudes of what belongs, and does not, in space and place.

II: How Stories Fit into Spaces: Processes and Practices of Darwesh

I came to know of Darwesh from published reviews of their performance walks that take place in Old Delhi. Co-founded by Yuveka Singh and Meghali Roy in 2013, the team includes two women who each lead in terms of research, content, and theatre areas. Today they are purposely an all-female organization, something that they believe is appealing especially to single women travelers (Indian and foreign) looking for safe tourism in Delhi.¹¹ Darwesh describes their work as promoting “experiential journeys” with a variety of heritage walk types

¹¹ The brutal gang rape and death of a young Delhi woman in 2012 heightened Delhi's reputation as a dangerous place for women, and immediately and negatively impacted the tourism industry in India. In a business meeting, Yuveka explained what the organization offers in terms of safety: “Darwesh offers a woman-centric experience. This is something special for the woman traveller. She can come to Delhi, notorious for its violence and harassment, and have a safe experience in historical monuments that are not as well protected by the ASI (Archaeological Survey of India).” Because Darwesh tours are always led by a member of the all-female team, they differ from the nearly all-male character of ASI accredited guides.

that aim at showcasing the city of Delhi's living history and culture.¹² They adopted the concept of the “dervish” for their organization's name because it reflects their perspective that the storytelling of heritage walks should be more of a lived experience rather than a monologue lecture format.¹³

In one of many conversations I had with Yuveka during fieldwork she put Darwesh's mission in simple terms: the organization explores how stories fit into spaces. This goal, along with other aspects of Darwesh's approach to heritage tourism, sets them apart from other initiatives in the very crowded tourism sphere in Delhi. The walks are created so that any member of the team can step in and fill the leadership role of guide. They are conducted mainly in English (a point I'll return to later), Hindi, and sometimes in a register of Urdu inflected with Urdu vocabulary. Performances included as part of a heritage tour is another aspect of their work that distinguishes Darwesh's position in the industry. Their decentralized approach to who leads each walk differs from other organizations, who often use local Delhi personalities to lead and market their walks. The price of a walk ticket ranges from 700 to 1000 INR, and they last two to three hours. Participants often receive a parting gift at the conclusion of each walk, which might be a customized Darwesh postcard, or a small trinket related to that walk's theme.

The performative walks are the most expensive walks that Darwesh offers because of the many costs that go into creating and organizing that type of event. Each actor is paid at least 2500 INR, and the presenter gets at least 1500 INR. Other costs include any costumes or props necessary for the performance and audio equipment when background music is used. There are a

¹² See Darwesh's official website. URL: <http://www.darwesh.in> (Accessed March 3, 2016).

¹³ See Ibid. Darwesh is meant to reflect “a group of thinkers, makers, dreamers, doers who share a common passion for what we call the “dervish” style of storytelling—storytelling as a lived experience rather than a monologue or a dialogue.” Accessed March 3, 2016.

lot of hidden or difficult to quantify costs involved in creating a performance walk. These include several trips to the neighborhood or monument in order to build content, and time spent on researching historical themes in the walk's narrative. Rehearsals for Darwesh performance walks are usually held at the Safdarjung monument, a large eighteenth-century monument that houses the tomb of a high-ranking minister during the rule of the Mughal Ahmad Shah Bahadur. An ideal setting for rehearsals, it is spacious and centrally located near Lodhi Gardens in Central Delhi. By the third time that a walk is held, Darwesh usually has recuperated the costs of researching and creating the walk. With sponsorship from local cultural institutions such as the India Habitat Centre, or the INTACH Organization (India National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage), Darwesh can offer walks at significantly lower prices (at the rate of 500 INR) and reach new audiences.

As the women build the content of a walk they scour neighborhoods, popping into shops, bazaars, and homes to explain their work and ask for any suggestions and related stories. During fieldwork I assisted the team with designing several new walks and witnessed this emphasis on stories and communities first hand. In one instance we were building a walk related to the month of Ramadan, and in searching for stories we were told by several people in the areas near the Jama Masjid (the largest mosque in India) to find the home of the Sultan family. Once we did find the home and were sitting with the family for tea, the eldest son took out family genealogical trees (*shajarah*) and started sharing some of his family's connections to local literary and religious personalities. That meeting led to the family requesting that they host the Ramadan walk participants for an *iftar*, or communal meal breaking the ritual fast. This family and their personal histories became a centerpiece for the Ramadan walk.

The walks that Darwesh produces mediate in how participants "know" the past, and its

connections to the present. During fieldwork Darwesh walks often ended with thanks given to Yuveka and the other organizers. “Thank you for showing us our heritage,” was a frequent sentiment expressed once the walk concluded. The typical audience for Darwesh’s type of tourism is a local Delhi-based individual who passes by monuments such as the Jahanpanah Fort every day but is not aware of who built the structure or any of the historical background of the space. Participants are usually those who prefer an informed historical narrative to accompany their experience of a monument. Their audience is also a set of people who have the money to spend on a leisure activity which is expensive compared to other forms of entertainment. The price of participating in a Darwesh walk is nearly twice what one would pay for an individual ticket in a multiplex movie theatre in urban North India.

The production team consists of three women, some with full-time jobs in addition to their work for Darwesh. One way that they try to overcome problems of a lack of staffing is to collaborate with other organizations in order to distribute the work load. They also encourage those who have attended walks to write a blog post on the history or current state of the place featured in the walk; in exchange they are not charged the regular fee for attendees. Leaders of walks have a lot of roles to play for participants that can make their work especially challenging. They physically lead the group through a sequence of places, they narrate the walk’s thematic content (sometimes in multiple languages), they are expected to satisfactorily answer numerous and varied questions from participants, and occasionally they have to jump into a historical role in performance walks. As one member of the team put it to me, “there are so many questions about architecture, social life, and history—you are expected to know everything!”

Another difficulty is the fact of Delhi’s notoriously extreme weather patterns. Typical Delhi weather means that the heritage walk season is compounded into a six-month time frame,

from October to March. Walks do get scheduled for the interim six months, but they are few and far between. The women of Darwesh continue to work in the summer and monsoon seasons, planning and testing out new walks for feasibility and interest.

Darwesh conceives of their work as an important method of building community and fostering local responsibility and ownership over Delhi's historical spaces. Yuveka and her team believe that by incorporating local stories into their walks they are building community relations that are key to the success of their approach to tourism. Many of the spaces where Darwesh operates in Delhi, such as the Jahanpanah Fort and Begumpur Mosque, are in serious disrepair and have become popular places for people to gamble, drink, and use drugs, often during the working day when walks occur. By showcasing the heritage of neighborhoods and monuments through stories and tourism, Darwesh endeavors to build community respect for, and ownership of, these spaces. It is a strategy to get locals involved in preserving their history and honoring their heritage.

III: Medieval Performance Spaces: Jahanpanah and Begumpur

Not much survives of the grand fort built by Muhammad bin Tughlaq called Jahanpanah, or “refuge of the world.” The remnants are located in what today is southwest Delhi, between Hauz Khas (which contains its own fifteenth-century ruins) and Malviya Nagar—home to many upper and upper middle class families. Construction is said to have begun in 1326, part of Tughlaq’s plan to unify several scattered settlements nearby: Siri Fort, Tughlaqabad Fort (built by his father Giyas-ud-din Tughlaq), and the city of Lal Kot. These plots were to be enclosed by a new single walled fort that would become Jahanpanah, the fourth city of Delhi.¹⁴ According to

¹⁴ Ibn Battuta mentions this plan in his diaries. See Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354*, H.A.R. Gibb, trans. (New York: R.M. McBride & Company, 1929), 194-95. For more on the development of the cities of Delhi,

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's geographical biography of Delhi, *Asar al-Sanadid (The Remnant Signs of Ancient Heroes)*, the city of Jahanpanah flourished until the year 1541, when it was abandoned during the reign of the Afghan warrior Sher Shah (ruled 1538-45).¹⁵



Fig. 3.2: The Vijay Mandal (image courtesy of the Aga Khan Visual Archive)

Today the structure within the fort that is the most intact is called the Vijay Mandal (Victory Tower). As one enters through the main gate there is a grassy hill and a large tree; under the tree are three white graves.¹⁶ The graves are covered with bright green cloth, and the general look of

see the essays in R.E. Frykenberg, ed., *Delhi Through the Ages: Essays in Urban History, Culture, and Society* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); A.K. Jain, *Dillināmā: The Cities of Delhi* (New Delhi: Synergy Books India, 2013); and Ram Avtar Sharma and Madhukar Tewari, *Delhi: Biography of a City* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2012).

¹⁵ Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Asar al-Sanadid* (Delhi: Santral Book Depot, 1965), 89-91. For more on the reign of Sher Shah see Basheer Ahmad Khan Matta, *Sher Shah Suri: A Fresh Perspective* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ According to Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *Asar al-Sanadid*, a Sufi saint from Jaunpur, Shaykh Hasan Tahir, is one of the people buried here. Tahir was attached to the court of the Delhi ruler Sikandar Lodhi (ruled 1489 to 1517). See Khan (1965 (1846), 89.

the site suggests that it is regularly maintained. In addition to the Vijay Mandal the largest intact structure at Jahanpanah is the foundation of the Hazar Sutoon (Hall of A Thousand Pillars). In his travelogues, Ibn Battuta describes this Hall as the place where Tughlaq held audiences with the public.¹⁷ Today what is left of this grand structure are several square blocks that must have been the bases for wooden pillars, and a large octagonal pavilion. Twin staircases within the pavilion lead to the roof, where it is thought that Tughlaq used to stand and review his militia. Today standing from the roof of the pavilion one has a fine view of the surrounding neighborhoods and of the nearby Begumpur Mosque. Also within view are the numerous encroachments of primarily unauthorized housing, where some of Delhi's poorest make their homes.



Fig. 3.3: Main gateway (*iwan*) of the Begumpur Mosque (image courtesy of the Aga Khan Visual Archive)

Although it was likely built after Tughlaq's death, the nearby Begumpur Mosque (*masjid*)

¹⁷ Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, 198.

is where the final two performance scenes of the “Mad Genius” walk are presented. It is thought that the mosque is one of seven built around the year 1387 by Khan-i Jahan Junan Shah, an influential minister in the court of Firoz Shah Tughlaq, Muhammad bin Tughlaq’s successor.¹⁸ The structure consists of a large courtyard (94 meters by 88 meters), and is enclosed by a vaulted arcade on each side. The ASI prohibits the use of mosques, including Begumpur, under its discretion to be used for religious activities.¹⁹ For many years, locals in the surrounding villages made their homes inside the mosque’s courtyard, and in 1921 the ASI forcibly evacuated all people, belongings, and cattle from the mosque.²⁰ It is difficult to imagine how grand this structure must have been when it was constructed; what once would have been a colorful and ornate mosque is today a bare stone structure that betrays neglect from the state and the community. Performances of Tughlaq—represented as an eccentric but enlightened Muslim ruler—bring Delhi locals to these historical spaces where they learn from and evaluate what Darwesh has to say about this medieval figure. Tughlaq has long been a focus in historiography, which is the source material for his continuous, incongruous representation.

¹⁸ Y.D. Sharma, *Delhi and Its Neighborhood* (Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1990), 73.

¹⁹ This prohibition was made clear in a letter from the ASI to a local Delhi police station following an incident in June 2015 when, according to the ASI and newspaper reports, a group of Muslims entered Khirki Mosque, which is an ASI “protected” monument. In their letter, the ASI cited the “Ancient Monument and Archaeological Site and Remains Act 1958, Rules 1959” and the “Ancient Monument and Archaeological Sites & Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act 2010” as the terms under which Muslims using the mosque for prayer would be violating. See Aditi Vatsa, “Police Seal Khirki Masjid After ‘Unauthorized’ Entry,” *Indian Express*, June 27, 2015. Accessed online July 3, 2016. URL: <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/police-seal-khirki-masjid-after-unauthorised-entry/>.

²⁰ Rana Safvi, “A Story of Neglect and Disrepair: Begumpur Masjid,” for TwoCircles.net. Accessed online July 6, 2016. URL: http://twocircles.net/2014jan08/story_neglect_and_disrepair_begumpur_masjid.html#.V30qNZMrJE4.

IV: Tughlaq in Historiography: Origins of a Stereotype

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger...only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.²¹

---Walter Benjamin, “*Theses on the Philosophy of History*”

The depiction of Tughlaq as complex yet of a schizophrenic personality is found over and over again in a broad historiography written primarily by British and South Asian scholars.

According to the *Biographical Dictionary of South Asia*, Tughlaq “was a man of complex personality. His innovations, his acts of cruelty and want of consideration for others have led many to brand him as a mad and bloodthirsty Sultan.” The entry finishes with language that is more balanced: “the truth perhaps lies in between the two. Muhammad Tughluq was neither a madman nor a genius, but was certainly a man of ideas who lacked in patience and had little sense of what was practical. In any case he was a ‘transcendent failure.’²² Descriptions of his character as inconsistent and irrational, yet at the same time inspired and enlightened, are used to justify the ‘wild schemes’ and ‘caprices’ of Tughlaq. Arriving at Tughlaq’s court around 1333, Ibn Battuta had a nearly ten-year association with the Sultan, including seven years as a judge (*qazi*) for his Delhi court. His diaries of this episode characterize Tughlaq as munificent but in some cases he was impetuous and inexorable: “in spite of all we have said of his humility, justice, compassion for the needy, and extraordinary generosity, the sultan was far too ready to shed blood. He punished small faults and great, without respect of persons, whether men of learning, piety, or high station.”²³ Mountstuart Elphinstone notes that Tughlaq knew languages

²¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn, trans. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pps. 253-264; 255.

²² *Biographical Dictionary of South Asia*. Syed Razi Wasti, ed. (Lahore: Publishers United, 1980), 366-67.

²³ Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, 203.

like Arabic and Persian, and excelled in subjects such as logic and Greek philosophy, mathematics and physical science. He was of a ‘moral’ character, abstaining from intoxicants and was a pious Muslim. This historian’s final judgement on Tughlaq’s disposition is rueful: “the whole of these splendid talents and accomplishments were given to him in vain; they were accompanied by a perversion of judgment which, after every allowance for the intoxication of absolute power, leaves us in doubt whether he was not affected by some degree of insanity.”²⁴

The primary historical source on Tughlaq is the *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi*, written by the court historian Ziya-ud-din Barani (1286-1359). Although Barani was an attendant in Tughlaq’s court for seventeen years, he actually spends little time on Tughlaq in his *Tarikh*. His narrative is structured with initial praise for Tughlaq’s “special pursuits” as an intellectual. He excelled at the written word, metaphor, Persian poetry, and was familiar with historiography related to Alexander the Great and Mahmud of Ghazni.²⁵ Barani next laments what he characterizes as Tughlaq’s practice and passion to mete out punishments: “not a day or week passed without the spilling of much *Musulman* blood.”²⁶ The historian found the ruler’s excessive punishment of Muslim subjects worthy of note. What follows in Barani’s account is detail of projects pursued by Tughlaq that were all, ultimately, failures:

Whatever he conceived he considered to be good, but in promulgating and enforcing his schemes he lost his hold upon the territories he possessed, disgusted his people, and emptied his treasury. Embarrassment upon embarrassment and confusion became worse confounded. The ill feeling of the people gave rise to outbreaks and revolts. The rules for enforcing the royal schemes became daily more oppressive to the people. More and more the people became disaffected, more and more the mid of the king was set against them, and the numbers of those brought to punishment increased.²⁷

²⁴ Mountstuart Elphinstone, *The History of India*, 2 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1841), vol 2:59.

²⁵ Ziya al-Din Barani, *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi*, 2 vols, Henry M. Elliot, trans., John Dowson, ed. (Lahore: Sind Sagar Academy, 1974), 2:152.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 2:153.

The failed attempt at relocating his capital to the south, along with a botched attempt at introducing a new currency system in order to revive his treasury, are touchstones in Barani's representation of Tughlaq as an ambitious yet misguided ruler. This contradiction, fueled by the ruler's temper, becomes the standard narrative for characterizations in historiography and in performance. In fictionalized presentations his conflicting nature is given a clinical, post-modern diagnosis; Tughlaq is insane, bi-polar, or schizophrenic.²⁸

Historians have been critical of the Barani narrative of Tughlaq's life and time in power. One trend of criticism blames Barani's personal dislike of the Sultan as the main impetus for his biased accounts. In his *The Rise and Fall of Muhammad bin Tughluq*, Aga Husain's appraisal of Barani as a historian acknowledges that the historian's private disapproval is what provoked his tendency to use exaggeration and satire in his account of Tughlaq's rule.²⁹ Because of Barani's "peculiar portraiture" of the Sultan, Husain remarks that the characterization which has been handed down as a "settled fact of history" is that Tughlaq was a "mixture of opposites: he was the most discourteous, the most humane and humiliating and the most tyrannical and arrogant, the most merciful and lenient and yet the most ruthless and cruel."³⁰

Husain emphasizes the Sultan's character in his declaration that "no account of the rise and fall of Muhammad bin Tughluq would be complete without a description of his character and personality."³¹ He comes to a more even assessment of Tughlaq after reading Barani in tandem with his peers. The Muslim ruler's character was not mad as others have claimed, but instead

²⁸ All descriptions I heard used by both producers and audiences of Tughlaq performances in Delhi during fieldwork.

²⁹ Aga Husain, *The Rise and Fall of Muhammad bin Tughluq* (London: Luzac, 1938).

³⁰ Ibid., 196.

³¹ Ibid., 192.

was rational and ethical: “as regards his morality or the observance on his part of a sound social code, there can be no doubt. Those who regard him a parricide will blame him for his selfishness...but no charge of loose morals, of depravity or of licentiousness can be brought against him. All records testify to his habits of temperance and sobriety.”³² The instances when Tughlaq is represented as acting irrationally are better understood within the context of medieval political requirements. Husain maintains that it is an anachronism to judge Tughlaq from a contemporary point of view: “the criterion of morality, the mode of life, the standard, and most importantly, the conception of sovereignty differed widely. The condition of India in the 14th century called for a strong monarch. Moderation would have been construed in those turbulent days as weakness.” Husain’s historiography of Tughlaq tempers extreme representations of the ruler as mad yet provides an explanation for those who come to that same conclusion: medieval rulers acted in ways that today are seen as rough or crude.

A different skepticism of Barani’s narrative argues that he never intended to draft a history of Tughlaq that would be understood as an objective account. Schimmel remarks that one should not accept all of Barani’s scholarship because his goal with the *Tarikh* was to create a *Fürstenspiegel*, or a Machiavelli-esque ‘mirror for princes.’³³ Peter Hardy argues that Barani wrote ideologically in order to depict a blueprint of the proper ruler. Through comparing Barani’s treatment of Tughlaq with his other treatises on political history, Hardy identifies a Barani “doctrine” according to which Sultans ought to possess contradictory qualities: “the capacity for wrath, for inspiring awe, and for meting out punishment to the contumacious on the one hand,

³² Ibid.

³³ Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent*, 21.

and the capacity for gentleness, for forbearance and for mercy on the other.”³⁴

Hardy’s critique of Barani’s intentions goes further than what the historian’s objective was in his narrative. He concludes that Barani has a particularly *religious* conception of the act of writing history: “he sees the past as a battleground between good and evil and men as combatants upon that field of battle. Barani treats history as a branch of theology.”³⁵ Barani’s motives in writing history in the manner that he did are that he had a soteriological understanding of his project: “he believed that he was offering to God something which would open the eyes of mankind to God, and, to the sultan, something which would benefit him in this world and the next.”³⁶ If indeed Barani understood the writing of history to have a didactic purpose for religious commitments, his characterizations of Tughlaq should be scrutinized for reasons other than simply a personal dislike of the ruler. His historiography would be better characterized as an attempt at intervening in Muslim debates on the piety and ethics of political rule.

Historians have relied on Barani’s peculiar construction of Tughlaq’s character as conflicted, even as they critique his motivations for doing so. Despite differing criticisms of Barani’s narrative his essential representation of the man’s character still stands as the main touchstone for historical and fictive accounts of Tughlaq. The orientalism that renders this Muslim ruler as both eccentric and enlightened began in the historian’s judgement of his rule and character, and continues in contemporary performance. What sets representations of Tughlaq in Darwesh performance walks which occur in Delhi today is that the rendered subject is given a voice and the opportunity to respond to history.

³⁴ Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India*, 124-5.

³⁵ Ibid., 39.

³⁶ Ibid., 22.

V: Tughlaq in Performance: “The Mad Genius” Talks Back to History

Muhammad:

You know what my beloved subjects call me?
Mad Muhammad! Mad Muhammad!³⁷

The content of Darwesh’s “Mad Genius” performance walk is based on the English version of Girish Karnad’s historical drama *Tughlaq*. Karnad composed the thirteen-scene play, originally in Kannada, while he was at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, and had it published in 1964. The play was first produced by the Indian National Theatre in Bombay in 1965, and had its first major run in Delhi in 1966. *Tughlaq* has been and continues to be one of the most produced modern Indian dramas; it has been staged not only in India but also Europe and the United States.³⁸ The play has been translated into all the major South Asian languages, and English. Karnad’s *Tughlaq* continues to resonate with audiences across generations and cultures in part because of the particular characterization of its central figure. Karnad skillfully develops the inconsistent natures of Tughlaq over the course of the narrative, as the character switches from conspirator to rational diplomat, sometimes in the space of a few scenes.³⁹

Karnad was inspired to take up Tughlaq as the subject for his historical drama in part because of how historians had rendered his personality as an inherently contradictory. Barani’s representation is reiterated in how Karnad describes his choice of historical subject:

My subject was the life of Muhammed Tughlaq, a fourteenth-century sultan of Delhi, certainly the most brilliant individual ever to ascend the throne of Delhi and also one of the biggest failures. After a reign distinguished for policies that today seem farsighted to the point of genius, but which in their day earned him the title “Muhammad the Mad,” the sultan ended his career in

³⁷ Girish Karnad, “Tughlaq,” in Girish Karnad, *Three Modern Indian Plays* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 56.

³⁸ Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 400.

³⁹ Aparna Dharwadker’s discussion of Karnad’s play puts its representations of history in conversation with other historical dramas. See “The Ironic History of the Nation,” in *ibid.*, 218-267.

bloodshed and political chaos.⁴⁰

Karnad's representation of Tughlaq goes beyond his intellectual predecessors to explore his personal motivations and questionable ethical decisions. Aparna Dharwadker describes Karnad's *Tughlaq* as an intervention into this historiography is because it provides an “explanatory psychological profile” of its central character.⁴¹ Dramatic and fictional representations of Tughlaq are events to revisit, and represent, how he has been characterized in historiography. Key to this process, as Dharwadker notes, is that in drama and performance audiences are presented with an explanation for Tughlaq's character. This accounting is delivered in the play by Tughlaq himself. As a form drama allows for Tughlaq to, in a sense, “return” from history and voice his justifications and rationale for his actions. Darwesh's “Mad Genius” performance walks provide an opportunity for participants to similarly hear from the Sultan himself, and they have the opportunity to question him based on this line of reasoning.

Introducing “Mad Muhammad”: A Psychology of Muslim Rule

Today's “Mad Genius” walk begins at the entrance to the Jahanpanah monument, early on a Sunday morning.⁴² There already is activity at the monument, despite the cold and foggy winter weather. Groups of older men sitting on jute mats in conversation, random boys and young men drinking beer and whiskey with soda, a few children playing cricket, and some workers repairing a damaged wall by adding new, large stones and cement. Some of them look at us with interest, others seem not to notice this group with notebooks and cameras ready and waiting for the walk

⁴⁰ Karnad, “In Search of a New Theatre,” 98.

⁴¹ Dharwadker, *Theatres of Independence*, 250.

⁴² The data in this section is based on three Darwesh “Mad Genius” walk events: January 11, 2015, February 8, 2015, and April 20, 2015.

to start. Our guide today, Yuveka Singh, starts by welcoming everyone and saying a few words about Darwesh, explaining their mission to showcase the heritage of Delhi through walks such as this.

Yuveka starts the content of the walk itself with a question for the participants: what do you know about Tughlaq history? A few in the group give a muffled reply. “Okay, well today you will learn,” she announces confidently. Her framing of the performance walk as an educational experience makes clear for the participants that they will be revisiting history and will finish the walk with new or changed perspectives. The ethical character of a medieval Delhi king, Muhammad bin Tughlaq, is at the center of the “Mad Genius” performance walk. Participants will be entertained by an actor appearing as the mad Sultan. Like representations of Tughlaq in historiography and in drama, the content of the walk is driven by episodes which develop the psychological profile of the Muslim ruler. This character sketch is driven by questions meant to index Tughlaq in ethical terms: did he really murder his own father? His court official Shihabuddin? How did he treat non-Muslim subjects? Group feedback and discussion that follow every Darwesh walk reveals that their presentation of Tughlaq is conflicted, confirming some assumptions and challenging others.

Yuveka’s introduction to the walk itself is a brief review of the history of the Delhi Sultanate (1207-1526). She gives a ten to fifteen minute timeline of dates and rulers, from Qutub-ud-din Aibak to the Tughlaqs.⁴³ This is also the moment in the walk when the narrative suggests a quality of the psychological profile of Tughlaq, that he was an ambitious ruler whose ambitions are circumspect and perhaps devious. Yuveka relays details about the strange

⁴³ See the Introduction for more on the historiography on the Delhi Sultanate period.

circumstances of the death of Tughlaq's father, the ruler Qiyas-ud-din Tughlaq, in 1324. She explains that the son Tughlaq had organized an official celebration for the father's military achievements in West Bengal. Tents were set up for officials and soldiers, and a feast had been prepared. Suddenly, a herd of elephants on the loose crashed the scene and caused havoc amongst the participants. The tent in which the father Qiyas-ud-din was residing in fell, and all inside crushed by the large animals. Upon his father's demise Muhammad bin Tughlaq became the new Sultan, ruling until his death in 1351.

After narrating the story of the father's bizarre death, Yuveka speculates on the son's motivations and presents Tughlaq as a scheming young man seeking out power:

The killing of the father was so upfront and obviously arranged by Tughlaq. He apparently wanted to celebrate his father's victory in West Bengal and so he ordered a large celebration. He had a tent constructed that was bound to fall. When his father and brother were in the tent, it fell. There are a lot of theories which question that, but he is an ambitious man. No question about that.⁴⁴

She continues characterizing Tughlaq's actions as devious by noting that the evidence to prove his intentions is the fact that he did not call for an official period of mourning for his father. Thus far, participants are presented historical details and given commentary that amounts to a clear characterization of Tughlaq as immoral and power hungry. In response to a question from a participant, Yuveka first is doubtful of his motivations but ends by reaffirming the ambitious nature of Tughlaq. This is her reply when asked specifically about the son's guilt in the death of the father: "we don't know for sure. Some say that he hid the guilt by offering special prayers in his father's name. There are references from travelers, like Ibn Battuta, that he (Tughlaq) is doing all of these things in his father's name. So that could have been his act of repentance. But one

⁴⁴ April 20, 2015 performance walk.

thing we do know for sure—he was an ambitious man.”⁴⁵

“It is an invitation, not a decree”: Justification and Criticism of Tughlaq

Announcer:

Attention! Attention!

The Merciful Sultan Muhammad has declared—
that within the next month every citizen
of Delhi must leave for Daulatabad.
No one should remain behind in Delhi.
Anyone who attempts to stay behind or
to go elsewhere will be severely punished.

All arrangements have been made to
ensure the comfort of citizens on the
way to Daultabad. All the needs of
the citizens, regarding food, clothing,
or medicine, will be catered to by the State.
It is hoped that every citizen will use these
amenities to the full and be in Daulatabad
as soon as possible. Attention! Attention!⁴⁶

Participants meet the performed Tughlaq early in the walk. The actor, dressed in fine robes fit for a king, struts out from behind a crumbling brick wall and takes a place in the middle of the audience. In this scene, Tughlaq describes his motivations for moving his capital from Delhi to the city of Daulatabad, nearly eight hundred miles south. One reason is that he believes that the move to a majority Hindu area will be seen by Hindus as a gesture of good will. This will also serve to improve Muslim and Hindu relations amongst his citizenry. He emphasizes his role as steward of his people and makes clear that he is not forcing people to move: “this is an invitation (*da’wat*), it is not official decree (*hukm*).” In this scene Tughlaq presents his intentions as benevolent towards his subjects and sensitive towards their religious and political divisions. He is a ruler taking steps to improve social relations, although the task to relocate to a faraway

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Karnad, “Tughlaq,” in *Three Modern Indian Plays*, 46.

area will be arduous. Historians condemn Tughlaq's decision to move his capital and enact a large-scale population shift as evidence of his despotism. In performance, the ruler has a voice with which he responds to critics and provides a rationale for his actions. This is Tughlaq talking back to how historiography has represented the ethics of his reign.

Once Tughlaq has finished his presentation our guide Yuveka steps into the performance to interrogate the Sultan on his real motivations to ask the citizens of Delhi to abandon their homes. "You have asked people to go to Daulatabad but you haven't assisted them in that task. You are saying that establishing strong Hindu and Muslim relations is your reasoning for the move, but there must be another reason behind that," Yuveka charges. Tughlaq is defensive in his response. Her accusation causes Tughlaq to shift from a benevolent disposition to an authoritative one. He ends his reply with a threat that every citizen must prepare for departure—there had better not be even one home with a lighted lamp in the window. In this first narrative segment and performance scene, Tughlaq's conflicting psychological profile is established by how he is characterized in narrative and how he presents himself in performance. His ruthless ambition is made clear in details of his father's death, and the severe changes in his disposition in the space of one scene suggest that he is more irrational than rational.

"Allah is the only one with me": Tughlaq's Ethics

After discussion about how Delhi citizens suffered as they made their way south to Daulatabad, Tughlaq re-appears in a brief scene to acknowledge that his grand plans have failed. "We must return to Delhi," he admits. Yuveka then steps in to preview the next performance scene which will return to exploring the ethics of Tughlaq as a Muslim and as a political ruler. She explains that upon returning to the former capital Tughlaq makes an important

announcement that abolishes all prayer in his kingdom. “Why does he abolish prayer at the court?” Yuveka poses to the audience. “That is an interesting question and I won’t spoil the suspicion—I mean, the drama—of why he takes that decision.” She leads the group to a second area within the monument where the group walks up to witness Tughlaq in the middle of prayer. A recording of the call to prayer (*azan*) is heard and after being still for a few moments, Tughlaq stands and paces the small space. Yuveka again becomes a part of the scene and warns the ruler that one of his advisors, Shihabuddin, has come up with a plan to assassinate Tughlaq at a time when he will be most vulnerable. This would be when he is engaged in prayer.

In a brief speech to the audience, Tughlaq provides his rationale for making prayer a crime. These comments forefront Tughlaq’s piety and the connections between his religion and his rule, but ultimately acts of faith are not as important as his personal safety and ambition:

In this kingdom every task is one of faith (*ibadaat*). Every act of piety is like a step on the ladder of knowledge; these steps allow one to reach Allah. But now, religious acts have become political acts. Go, and announce to the people that no one is allowed to offer prayer in this kingdom! The punishment for engaging in prayer is death!

After dramatically making his announcement, Tughlaq swiftly pivots and marches away from the audience.

Muhammad:

God, God in Heaven, please help me.
 Please don’t let go of my hand. My skin drips with blood
 and I don’t know how much of it is mine and how
 much of others. I started in Your path, Lord,
 why am I wandering naked in this desert now?
 I started in search of You. Why have I become a
 pig rolling in this gory mud? Raise me. Clean me.
 Cover me with Your Infinite Mercy. I can only
 clutch at the hem of Your cloak with my bloody
 fingers and plead. I can only beg—have pity on me.
 I have no one but You now. Only You. Only

You....You...You...You...⁴⁷

He conceals himself behind a large stone pillar for a minute and then reappears to perform the next brief, but revelatory scene. Tughlaq has taken a position facing the group, looks straight forwardly to a few in the crowd, and begins his confessional: “yes, I was behind the murder of my father. And the killing of my advisor Shihabuddin. Now all I have is my craziness (*pagalpan*). Yet I am not alone. Allah is with me! Allah was also present when I made these decisions. Allah was there.”

Here the subject diagnoses himself and lays out his pathology in straightforward language. Tughlaq concedes that he engaged in immoral acts in the deaths of his father and his courtier. Acts that are clearly unethical are in a bizarre way given ethical sanction when Tughlaq maintains that Allah was with him in those decisions and in those moments. The madness of this Muslim ruler is what allows him to directly admit what he had so far avoided taking responsibility for. Moving from implication and suggestion to madcap performance, Tughlaq’s irrationality is on full display in this extraordinary confession.

Yuveka steps forward after this scene to comment on what has just been said and enacted. To start, she points out to the group that we had discussed whether or not Tughlaq is guilty just a few moments earlier. Reminding everyone that what they have just seen is a “dramatic representation,” she nevertheless states that, “there must have been some guilt.” And to justify that guilt, Yuveka explains that Tughlaq invoked the power of religion: “He justified it by saying there is God, and he is the one who is supporting me in taking the decision. He is the one who is giving me the courage to kill people with my own two hands. For a criminal of an extreme kind

⁴⁷ Ibid., 67.

they will always have their justification, which in their head is quite logical. Otherwise one can't live with it."

A student interrupts the guide to ask her to clarify these details—who was Shihabuddin, and why was he murdered? He led the plot to assassinate Tughlaq when the Sultan would be in the middle of prayer. In retaliation, Tughlaq himself murdered the traitor as they were performing ritual prayers in a group. In her answer Yuveka provides more explanation as to why Tughlaq chose to assassinate his courtier during prayer: "The best time to kill is when one is in a prayerful mode (*ibadaat*), because that person will be without weapons and protection. At the time when you are remembering God, you are not supposed to have any artillery or weapons with you." As the walk guide Yuveka further develops a psychological profile of Tughlaq as one who discards religious precepts in order to exact revenge and stabilize his political position.

Now that the characterization of Tughlaq as unethical vengeful Muslim ruler has been established in both performance and in commentary, Yuveka announces to the group that we will next get to know the good qualities of the man. She enunciates a list of his intellectual and artistic capacities, including knowledge of Persian and Arabic, of astronomy and astrology, and in the art of calligraphy. He was concerned that proper Islamic law—*shari'a*—be implemented in his kingdom. She mentions that it was Tughlaq who made the famous traveler Ibn Battuta a judge (*qazi*) for his local administration. "People do not know that he was a learned man," Yuveka remarks, "so that is why he is called the 'mad genius.' Mad—we already know, because it was presented to you—and genius, I have just told you. He constantly struggled with his sane and insane sides."

In the next part of the walk, Yuveka narrates an infamous episode in Tughlaq's history related to the currency system. Possibly influenced by the Chinese switch to paper money,

Tughlaq decided in 1329 to introduce a new system of brass and copper coins as official currency.⁴⁸ These coins were determined to be equivalent to increasingly rare silver coins already in circulation. In her explanation of this decision, Yuveka emphasizes the rational reasons for his efforts: “this was done in order to balance the economy, because it would make things cheaper. It would bring his economy back to balance. What he didn’t look into is that the coins could be copied. So then he asked for the coins back and did an exchange for coins made with a cheaper metal.” Because of counterfeit coins, Tughlaq had to reverse his decision somewhat and offer exchanges of copper and brass for silver and gold, which many took advantage of.⁴⁹ Yuveka puts this scenario in terms that her contemporary audience will understand: “if I were to translate what that would mean today, it is like exchanging a package of chips for a set of gold earrings.” There is no performance associated with this part of the walk, but it relates an incident during Tughlaq’s rule when a presumably informed decision backfired. It reveals that Tughlaq could be “enlightened,” at times. In terms of Tughlaq’s character this story shows that he was a ruler seemingly ahead of his time but sabotaged by elements within his kingdom.

“It is a mixed character”: Participant Discussion and Feedback

In heritage performance walks, the producers of historical narrative and information deliver those details for a participant audience, who have the immediate opportunity to ask questions and give feedback. In certain cases, this back and forth between walk guides and leaders led to on the spot revisions of what had been presented. In nearly all cases, participants and guides reflected on what was learned and how that may differ from previously held

⁴⁸ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 115.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 116.

assumptions. The following transcript of the discussion closing the February 8, 2015 “Mad Genius” walk substantiates how performance walks are an experience that leads to new learning:

Yuveka Singh (guide): Are there any questions?

Participant: Yes, I have a small thing to ask. In the history we read in school we get to know that Muhammad bin Tughlaq—he is a failure. He is a failure and he is marked as an eccentric. But here, we get to know his conviction, his way of seeing, his own justifications of his own acts. But there is another side of it—which historians have mostly discovered and interpreted. There must be some balance between the two.

(after a pause)

But I would like to know about his failures. One was these copper coins, one was the shifting of the dynasty (from Delhi to Daulatabad), and any other things which give the historians so much conviction that he was a failure.

Yuveka: See, there were two (mistakes)--these were the primary two. There is no other recorded evidence. Like I said, the other move of sending emissaries was very, very successful. And that is also perhaps why he is referred to as a ‘Mad Genius.’ Remember the word ‘genius’ is also attached to that. It is not just his unsuccessful or so-called bad moves. But someone who led and ruled for twenty-four years--

Participant: (interrupting) Yes, he ruled for twenty-five years. So he must have some powerful qualities in him to make this empire intact.

Yuveka Singh: Yes. And that reminds me—another thing that he did in which he was rather unsuccessful is in regards to Sufi saints. He tried to get the support of Sufi saints, but that was entirely unsuccessful. Because the *ulama* at one time--remember he is not very *stringently* Islamic in that sense. He also was liberal. In fact he also gave away the extra tax that was levied on the Hindus, which went against the *ulama*’s cause for power and how they saw religion to become part of the courtly affairs. But he did that. And that was seen as a very wrong move for a lot of people in the court. And even people who are siding with him would have actually told him not to do that. He went ahead and did that, so he was also very adamant in the way he thought. That was one of the things in which he tried--because the *ulama* were against him, so he went to the Sufi saints. We know for sure in history that Nizamuddin Aulia was someone he went to constantly. But he did not get much support from him. So that is one of the things which failed.⁵⁰

(after a pause)

Yuveka Singh: He did have the right kind of people in the right kind of places in his empire, to actually take it forward. But yeah, it is a mixed—

Participant: (interrupting) It is a mixed character.

Yuveka Singh: Yes, and that is precisely why he is so enigmatic. This king, who has initiated so many things and laid the foundation of many new policies which come and take place in India, is at the same time someone whose new policies have actually backfired. So it is both. But we have to understand that the character is not—I mean, any of us, have these different shades. But I think the inherent quality of power is that it tends to be misused. And how you use it, and how you

⁵⁰ This statement is likely incorrect. Nizamuddin Aulia died in the year 1325, the year of Tughlaq’s father’s death and when he was made ruler. The relationship between the father, Qiyas-ud-din Tughlaq, and the Sufi saint is well known. See Husain, *Rise and Fall*, 70.

misuse it, is what makes you an important emperor and someone who will be remembered. That is what Muhammad bin Tughlaq becomes. And that is why there are so many plays on him, so many people who have written on him, he makes a very interesting character.

The participant's reaction to how Darwesh and Yuveka have represented this historical figure is one of wonder because it complicates what she claims to have learned in school—that Muhammad bin Tughlaq was an eccentric failure. Her literal processing of the performance and historical narrative with participants and the walk guide reveals how the Darwesh team has changed her view. We come to know of his rationale and his justifications; the walk allows the character of Tughlaq to have a voice and represent himself in how he is understood. This participant is quick to mention the role of historians in how Tughlaq is represented in mainly negative and outlandish ways. The personal voice of Tughlaq as performed in this walk should be put in “balance” with his historical representation.

In her answer, Yuveka confirms this need for equity and offers new information that confirms Tughlaq as a “failure.” In doing so she makes particular statements about how the Sultan’s religious identity and his relationships with another Muslim authority—the *ulama*. Apparently “stringency” for how Muslims are understood is defined by how they treat their non-Muslim subjects. As is the case with other representations of pre-modern and medieval Muslim rulers, those who treat Hindus fairly are considered enlightened and liberal. Those who choose not to impose the *jizya* tax on non-Muslims are categorized as liberal—a common theme in the dramatic depiction of the religious and political commitments of north Indian Muslim kings.⁵¹

⁵¹ This was a tax levied on non-Muslims in states and empires governed by Muslims. Indexing Muslim rulers in terms of their application of this tax seems to be a particularly South Asian agenda, even though *jizya* was never exclusively South Asian. It was applied to Christians and Jews in the Middle East. See Cahen, Cl.; İnalçık, Halil; Hardy, P.. “*Djizya*.” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Ed. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2016. Reference. Columbia University. March 18 2016. URL: http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/djizya-COM_0192.

Darwesh's schizophrenic representation enacts orientalist stereotypes of Muslim rule and disposition. The walk is marketed as a performance of a "Mad Genius," and his assumed mental capacity and irrationality are key takeaways for participants. A student part of the April 20, 2015 "Mad Genius" walk summed up her experience in a review published on her school's website:

Muhammad bin Tughluq was originally named Ulluk Khan. He was a very ambitious king who became ruler at a very young age of 21. He is believed to have killed his father and brother to capture the throne of Delhi. He was called a 'mad-genius' by many. If today psychologists were to test his brain, he would be termed a person with a sort of multiple personality disorder. He also implemented some innovative ideas which were alas a failure when implemented. He died on 20 March 1351.⁵²

If psychologists today were to test Tughlaq's brain, he would be diagnosed with multiple personality disorder—this is an opinion that was not expressed by the walk guide nor by the actor in performance. It is an idea that the student came away with after participating in that walk, and it recalls similarly clinical descriptions that diagnose him as bi-polar and insane. The emphasis on Tughlaq's psychological profile in representation and performance may make him more of an "interesting" character as Yuveka explained above, yet it conjures orientalist tropes that are a concern for many types of heritage tourism. Are Muslims, as a marginalized community in India, only of interest to history if they are irrational and eccentric? Students leave this heritage walk believing Tughlaq to have had a clinical disorder—far from the "genius" that Darwesh indicates in the title of this performance. Performances like the "Mad Genius" walk are examples of how heritage tourism participates in identity construction, how it serves ideological interests, and how these events mediate the politics of space and place associated with a minority past.

⁵² The author is Surabhi Sanghi. URL: <http://theindianschool.in/stories-in-stone-a-heritage-walk-at-begumpuri-mosque/>. Accessed March 3, 2016.

VI: The Past in Delhi's Present: Tourism, Heritage, and the Politics of the Past

Participating in a Darwesh heritage walk like the “Mad Genius” performance event, for most people, is an opportunity and an exposure to new ideas and to unfamiliar spaces. Those unfamiliar with the details of medieval Delhi history may finish the walk feeling informed about the Tughlaq dynasty and about Muhammad bin Tughlaq in particular. A tourist might spend time at a space that they would normally not visit, like the Jahanpanah Fort, or they might understand a space differently if they have toured the site previously. Ideally, the Darwesh team would like for participants to construct a sense of ownership and responsibility for the heritage and the literal spaces showcased in their walks. Each heritage walk event is an opportunity for dynamic processes of learning about the history, actors, and spaces of Delhi—a walk offers possibilities, not assurances, of learning and constructing stewardship.

Darwesh walks emphasize what they determine are aspects of Delhi’s neglected or forgotten medieval heritage. Heritage in this sense is not conceptualized as something that only remains in the past; it serves important needs and desires for contemporary guides and participants. In their approach to the study of heritage tourism, Brian Graham and Peter Howard take a constructionist perspective on defining what heritage is and how it functions in social worlds. Heritage refers to “the ways in which very selective past material artifacts, natural landscapes, mythologies, memories and traditions become cultural, political, and economic resources for the present.”⁵³ It is a definition of heritage that emphasizes the functions of

⁵³ Brian Graham and Peter Howard, “Heritage and Identity,” in Brian Graham and Peter Howard, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publications, 2008), 1-18; 2.

representation *for the present*. There is a need to revisit the past, and in doing so represent it in particular ways, in order to infuse history to serve complex and varied purposes related to present circumstances.

Heritage tourism is linked to commodification of the past and utilizes histories to market what is distinctive or unique about space and place. As a matter of representation, these strategies are subject to criticism when they distort histories in order to present a sanitized or censored version of the past understood to be more marketable to audiences. Colin Michael Hall and Shalini Modi are skeptical of heritage tourism that, in the effort of marketing, erases marginal histories of exploitation, oppression, and conflict.⁵⁴ Examples from contemporary Indian state tourism shows how national minorities are distorted and erased in biased presentations. A common finding among scholars of the Indian industry is that guides provide information about the histories of Muslims which is highly ideological or counterfactual. In his study of the contemporary legacy of Delhi's medieval heritage, Sunil Kumar describes how tourist guides accredited by the ASI are influenced more by ideology rather than historical accuracy. He explains how this tendency influences official guide presentations at Qutb Minar, a famous archaeological and heritage site in today's South Delhi. The Qutb Minar complex is home to several monuments, victory towers, and tombs, and was built (and rebuilt) by many religious communities—Muslims, Jains, and Hindus. Kumar describes how the Muslim histories attached to this site are ideologically presented using the familiar stereotypes within Indian discourse of Muslims as foreign and violent invaders:

If you are a tourist and know nothing about the place there is a good likelihood that you will hire a tour guide, accredited by the Archaeological Survey of India, no less. The gentlemen (they are generally, all men) carry with them a patronizing air of authority; these are venerable historians

⁵⁴ Colin Michael Hall, *Tourism and Politics: Policy, Power, and Place* (Chichester; New York: Wiley, 1994), and Shalini Modi, *Tourism and Society: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2001).

who will, for a paltry sum of money, educate you about the mysteries of the strange monuments before you. Over the next hour and a half you will hear about Prithviraj's temple, his Vijaysthamb (his victory tower—the Qutb minar), built for Prithviraj's daughter so that she could perform her sun worship while facing the Jumna (river) every morning. The details of Muslim iconoclasm would be laid bare even as the details of the old Hindu temple (not Jain, mind you) are carefully drawn out. By the time the visitor leaves the Qutb precincts, the area would appear as the cradle of Hindu civilization vandalized by foreign Muslim invaders.⁵⁵

Ranjan Bandyopadhyay et al. argue that narratives of Muslim tyranny and destruction are found across diverse sectors of Indian heritage tourism, and are prevalent in state-sponsored materials.⁵⁶ The “atrocities of Muslim emperors” is given emphasis in contrast to the resilience of non-Muslims, usually Hindus, who saved their temples and heritage from “Muslim” destructive and plundering forces.⁵⁷ While it is to be expected that a tourist guide will give a biased presentation, consistent distortion of the actions and motivations of historical Muslims from official sources indicates that this bias is closely associated with the post-Partition exclusion of Muslims from the state narrative of heritage and progress.

Darwesh's work is associated with an approach in the industry that recovers marginal pasts and thus shows how heritage tourism has emancipatory potential.⁵⁸ Set within the larger context of social discourse that narrowly constructs Indian identity using Hindu histories, the Muslim connection to these forgotten pasts and neglected monuments means that Darwesh's agenda with heritage walks has political implications. While their heritage tourism recovers Muslim histories, it also tends to reproduce the constructs that continue to marginalize those

⁵⁵ Kumar, *The Present in Delhi's Pasts*, x.

⁵⁶ Ranjan Bandyopadhyay et al., “Religion and Identity in India's Heritage Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* (Vol. 35:3, 2008), pps. 790-808.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 798-99.

⁵⁸ See Mike Crang, “On the Heritage Trail: Maps of and Journeys to Olde Englande,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12, pps. 341-55, and Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1995) for studies of the potential of the heritage tourism industry to further the political interests of subaltern communities.

pasts—a pattern that I discuss in more detail below.

Cultural tourism in the form of heritage walks is related to individual understandings of self and the nation. The majority of participants on Darwesh events are not foreign tourists—they are domestic, and often live not far from the Delhi monuments included in a walk. Thus to experience a heritage walk is an opportunity for local Delhi citizens to re-discover “who they are and where they have come from.”⁵⁹ Mark Neumann argues that the role of tourism in terms of constructing self-meaning takes on metaphorical aspects in postmodern societies:

Tourism is a metaphor for our struggle to make sense of our self and world within a highly differentiated culture...it directs us to sites where people are at work making meaning, situating themselves in relation to public spectacle and making a biography that provides some coherency between self and world.⁶⁰

Visitors to medieval monuments who are informed through listening to historical narrative and entertained by performance construct and reproduce meaning as individuals who are also Indian citizens. Darwesh walks are more than simply a benign two-hour journey to the fourteenth-century; these events are a strategic presentation of information, and participants interact with those details in dynamic ways throughout the walk.

Darwesh heritage walks place a high importance on the experience of neglected spaces in Delhi, and many of these spaces were constructed during medieval times and under the auspices of Muslim elites. Pre-modern structures that once must have been adorned with colorful plaster walls, Qur’anic inscriptions, and decorative ornamentation today have been stripped of all embellishment. In many of these monuments a fragment of decoration remains to suggest what the rest of the building might have looked like. At present, medieval forts, mosques, and palaces

⁵⁹ Catherine Palmer, “Tourism and the Symbols of Identity,” *Tourism Management* 20 (1999), pp. 313–321; 315.

⁶⁰ Mark Neumann, “Wandering Through the Museum: Experience and Identity in a Spectator Culture,” *Border/Lines* (Summer 1988), pp. 19-27; 22.

built by Muslim elites in North India have deteriorated to the point that they simply consist of the stone structure that served as scaffolding when they were built. Some spaces, such as the Khirki mosque in south Delhi, have severe structural damage and many are damaged further by the presence of animals, usually bats, and their waste products.

As mentioned earlier, Darwesh seeks to cultivate feelings of social responsibility and stewardship over these sites that have seemingly been forgotten by successive Indian governments and elite institutions. Sunil Kumar documents change and neglect in several areas in Delhi built during the period of the Delhi Sultanate (twelfth to fifteenth-centuries) and identifies an ideological view of the ASI that deems sites connected to Muslim histories, or used in Muslim presents, as not worthy of protection or care.⁶¹ Anand Vivek Taneja reveals the binarism of the ASI's classification system of monuments in Delhi as "living" and "dead"—as if these spaces existed in a separate universe from the present moment. He provides a corrective to this epistemology to argue a relationship that is dialogical—these places operate as if they are a parallel universe, with the medieval past commenting on the state of Delhi's present.⁶² The existence of pre-modern monuments built by Muslim rulers scattered throughout the city of Delhi is a reminder of a time when Muslim rule governed society and influenced culture. Muslims in power and of influence is a distortion of their often marginalized position in contemporary Indian society. The ways in which governmental institutions define some of these spaces as "dead" is an ideological move to deny that they are part of India's "living" heritage. Darwesh's work to highlight some of these same monuments and spaces intervenes actively in

⁶¹ Kumar, *The Present in Delhi's Pasts*, x-xi.

⁶² Anand Vivek Taneja, "Nature, History, and the Sacred in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2013), 328.

that ideological discourse to show that not only are these spaces “living,” to use the ASI’s terminology, but they are aspects of social and cultural life in Delhi today that deserve special attention. The content of their narratives of the past, and some of the strategies used to present this material, puts the potential to offer progressive presentation of Muslim pasts into question.

VII: Accuracy and Authenticity in Darwesh Heritage Walks

Darwesh prides themselves on providing historical and cultural information that is extensively researched, accurate, and cross-checked. In addition to being a part of Darwesh, Meghali Roy is a graduate student at Delhi University. She collects much of the background research for walks, using diverse sources including libraries and material online. Occasionally the team seeks research assistance from local scholars; for example, I collected data on early Afghan communities in Delhi for a Darwesh walk during fieldwork. Relying on scholarship to identify historical “facts” is one way that the team understands accuracy. Another aspect to their goals of accuracy is in terms of performance costume. The team uses online sources, historical works, and looks to examples from cinema in order to make authentic choices in dress. Finally, location is an aspect to their goals to engage in a more authentic experience. They try to conduct heritage walks in the spaces associated with the topics, history, and other content of the walk. The “Mad Genius” walks based on the life of Muhammad bin Tughlaq are performed in the fort that he had built during his time in power. A walk based on the life of Mughal princesses occurs at Roshanara Bagh, the palace and gardens built by the Mughal ruler Shahjehan’s daughter Roshanara Begum who died in 1671 and is buried within the complex.⁶³

⁶³ Percival Spear, updated and annotated by Narayani Gupta and Laura Sykes, *Delhi: Its Monuments and History* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 14-15.

Any narrative presentation—like any representation, or performance—is a cultivated and ideological product. Thus the stories that Darwesh produces for their heritage work, which they understand as more accurate than that of other tours, participate in a larger discourse about ideology, authenticity, and history in the tourism sector. Darwesh walks are also ideological presentations of history, and they also replicate problematic stereotypes of Muslims, as evidenced in their narrative about and performances of Tughlaq. When I raised the matter of historical accuracy with Yuveka she explained that she understood the tourism approach to historical accuracy in terms of two poles, one being strictly “academic,” based on verifiable facts, and the other one being story-oriented. What Darwesh tries to do is a bit of both—they draw on the former and focus on the latter. What they do not want is for the walk content to turn into what Yuveka described as “*mirch masala*,” or literally “spicy spicy.”⁶⁴ Darwesh’s “Mad Genius” presentation of Tughlaq could be understood as historically accurate, because it conforms to how he has been constructed in historiography. Yet they had no historical precedent for how to perform Tughlaq’s voice, instead relying on Karnad’s fictional text and some of their own ideas. The storytelling element in this performance replicates the incongruous stereotype of Tughlaq as a mad Muslim for entertainment value. A more interesting presentation, and one that would certainly entertain, would dislodge the Muslim from this typology and allow his voice to challenge how he is known in the past and in the present.

Other choices that Darwesh makes in their heritage tourism performances seem to undermine their objective to be as accurate as possible. A primary issue is one of language—the language of a walk’s presentation and its performance element. Yuveka explained to me that

⁶⁴ This is a phrase commonly used to describe exaggeration or high melodrama in cultural productions, especially in commercial Indian cinema.

which language to use is a matter of constant debate amongst the team. English is the usual language for the guide's narrative and if there is a performance, that language is sometimes also English and sometimes Hindi – Urdu. Participants can often understand both, but it is clear that English is a more comfortable medium for many of the presenters. In their "Mad Genius" walks based on Tughlaq, the actor playing the ruler speaks in Urdu and uses many vocabulary words that are shared with older forms of the Persian language. In her role as the walk guide, Yuveka usually uses English and will give summaries of the Urdu content in English. These choices in language do not reflect their fourteenth-century past, since the primary language spoken in Tughlaq's court would have been Persian inflected with vocabulary from proto-Hindi local dialects, depending upon the speaker.⁶⁵

Participants often ask the Darwesh team why heritage walks like those based on Tughlaq's life are not conducted entirely in Hindi – Urdu, because they expect some historicity in the language of presentation. In a different Darwesh performance walk based on the lives of eighteenth-century Mughal women, all historical scenes are in English when most likely they spoke either Persian or Urdu. Participants react to that walk in a similar way, critiquing the choice to perform in English instead of a language more precise to the history. Conducting their historical walks in the language most correct for their time would result in much less comprehension. Local Delhi participants are not as familiar with a high register of spoken Urdu (inflected with Persian vocabulary), much less so with the Persian that would be a more accurate language appropriate to Tughlaq's era. Many who attend their walks connect historical authenticity to language, and Darwesh's reliance on English inhibits a more enthusiastic

⁶⁵ See "Language and Power" in Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pps. 115-133, and Muhammad Abdul Gham, *The Pre-Mughal Persian in Hindustān* (Allahabad: The Allahabad Law Journal Press, 1941), 467-485.

reception of their historical work.

English is a second or third language for many participants on a Darwesh walk. That is often not the case with many people from the local Delhi neighborhoods where Darwesh offers their tours. During fieldwork, groups of locals—usually young men and boys—would gather to listen to the stories or to watch the performances. Occasionally I asked these bystanders what they thought of what they were hearing and seeing, and often I was told that they didn't understand English well, so following the presentation was difficult. This language divide obstructs local access that could help Darwesh encourage local stewardship of space.

VIII: Ambivalence and Belonging in Heritage Monuments

Theorists of space and place discussed earlier identify ways in which different values are attached to a location, according to the attitudes and expectations of users. People judge the same space in different ways: certain activities are appropriate, and others “do not belong,” in that place. Uncovering the ideological assumptions that multiple users bring in their evaluation of the activities within a space shows the different ways in which any place is socially constructed, sometimes in conflicting ways. In the context of heritage walks in Delhi conducted in pre-modern monuments built by Muslims, the attitude that some activities belong, and others do not, within these spaces is tied to the ambivalent nature of place and broader understandings about Indian Muslim belonging.

Several episodes during fieldwork reveal ambivalent attitudes about what is appropriate in the Jahanpanah monument areas. Darwesh heritage walks are usually scheduled on the weekends, and mainly on Sunday mornings, as Sunday is the customary day off for most workers. Sundays are also the days when the public spaces of urban Delhi—parks, gardens, and

historical monuments—are full of gatherings of families and friends. Other kinds of gatherings that are endemic to monuments involve questionable activities and threaten the heritage tourism that occurs in those same spaces, often at the same time. Young boys and men frequent these monuments at all times of day to play cards, drink liquor, and use illegal drugs. Their presence is so visible that a common feedback to the Darwesh team is that the sight of people drinking and doing drugs was an unfavorable part of what was otherwise a fantastic experience.

During a Sunday morning walk at Jahanpanah I was struck by the numbers of people drinking, quite openly, in the monument. At one point two young men were sitting with bottles of cheap whiskey and soda in an area very close to where the performance was happening. During another walk, I saw men carrying very large bottles of Indian beer inside the monument's main entrance. The problem of open drinking at Jahanpanah was a comment that Darwesh received from a performance walk sponsored by Microsoft for some of its local Delhi employees. "What can we do," Yuveka asked me when we discussed the feedback from this walk. "When I complain to the ASI guards about these drinkers, they tell me that if they attempt to stop anyone the men threaten to beat them up." The threat of physical violence that these men raise when their activity is questioned was confirmed to me in several causal conversations with ASI guards. Having noticed a man walk right past our group, and the guard, carrying several large beer bottles I asked the guard why he didn't try to stop him. The guard looked at me and replied that if he tries to stop men from bringing in liquor, they will assault him.

While these guards often do nothing to stop open drinking in monuments they frequently attempt to stop members of the Darwesh team from entering sites for an organized walk, accusing organizers of not having obtained the proper permissions from the ASI to conduct the walk. I once pointed out the irony of who gets stopped and why in a conversation with a guard

who was confused about Darwesh's plans inside the Jahanpanah monument. "Sir," I started, "Darwesh has received the necessary permissions and will confirm this by phone shortly. But I have a question: why are you trying to prevent us from touring this space, and at the same time you do not try to stop men from drinking here in the open?" He gave me the standard reasoning linked to threats of violence from the drinking men. After a pause, I smiled at him and made a threat of my own: "Okay. Well, what if *I* threaten to beat you up if you don't allow our group to come inside?" He laughed at the strange suggestion that I, as a Hindi speaking foreign woman, would do such a thing.

During fieldwork I observed many times the confusion and sometimes outright dismissal of Darwesh's educational activities by many ASI guards. When I asked members of Darwesh about the actions of these guards, they blamed the problem on communication issues within the ASI, and a frequent rotation of guards who might otherwise recognize team members and allow access. Official permission is granted orally, with no documentation on either side that could serve as evidence that necessary steps were taken. Darwesh strives to have a clear and communicative relationship with the ASI in order to ensure the success of their walks. Yuveka regularly meets with ASI officials to inform them about details of the heritage walks and to request their assistance in reducing the numbers of men drinking in monuments, which she believes is one of the largest obstacles for Darwesh. As a way of further improving this relationship, it was frequently mentioned that they planned to ask a high-ranking member of the ASI to sit on the organizational board in conversations about Darwesh evolving into a NGO.

The influence that the ASI has over who enters these monuments directly impacts the customer experience of Darwesh walks. In the course of fieldwork I attended many Darwesh tours in different spaces, where the presence of men drinking and gambling affected my

experience in various ways. One walk stands out in particular for the remarkably sanitized feel of the monument's space during a walk at Jahanpanah organized for students from several of Delhi's elite private schools. The students, all involved in history clubs, were brought to the monument for a special rendition of the "Mad Genius" Tughlaq performance walk. The event was sponsored by the Delhi-based INTACH organization in partnership with the ASI. Usually there is only one ASI guard at the monument's main entrance; this time, I counted ten guards stationed at various places inside and outside Jahanpanah. Often one would find small groups of men drinking that numbered in the tens; however, on this day I could not find a single person in the monument who was not there for tourism. It was obvious that this event prompted the ASI to make Jahanpanah a sanitized and safe space for these students, many of whom were visiting the monument for the first time. They would relate their experience to their parents, who would be potential tourists themselves in the future.

Contradictory attitudes about what activities are permissible inside the pre-modern monuments of Delhi indicates the many ways that these spaces associated with Indian Muslims are socially constructed. It is also clear that the idea of "protection" and care of monuments is understood differently by the ASI and the tourism industry. Producers of heritage tourism like Darwesh inscribe historical meaning and economic value into these spaces that are far off the usual tourist map of Delhi. Darwesh also seeks to build local stewardship of sites like Jahanpanah, which would be redundant if the state enacted its stated role as protector of heritage sites. The ASI sees its mission to guard heritage monuments differently when the audience is comprised of young students from elite schools. The efforts that the ASI made to remove Jahanpanah of all drinking, gambling, or drugs on the occasion of the school visit reveals that they realize the negative affect that such activities could have on both how the monument and

their work as an institution are understood. In context of the ASI's usual permissive attitude towards such behaviors, that they cleaned up for school children means that the ideology of education as a project of inculcating love of country and citizenship trumped that of disinterest in the preservation of Jahanpanah.

Differences in how the space of Jahanpanah is socially constructed by the groups that operate within it indicates the ambivalent nature of space and place. Producers of heritage tourism like Darwesh believe that their objectives to educate locals, preserve history, and promote stewardship is a worthier cause than allowing certain kinds of leisure activities to occur within monument premises. The ASI's stance on stewardship and protection is mixed; they do not actively prevent drinking and gambling unless there is a sociopolitical agenda to override their ideology of neglect. That neglect has led to a social understanding according to which, activities which could lead to further deterioration of pre-modern monuments are considered permissible by some. That these spaces are associated with Muslim pasts and presents is another factor in terms of how they are constructed differently by heritage tourism, locals, and the state. Returning to the theme of belonging, the active neglect on behalf of the state towards these spaces reveals that the state does not believe that they "belong" in the agenda of India's national heritage and tourism industry. Yet not all pre-modern monuments built by Muslims are neglected in the ways that many in Delhi (and north India) are. The Taj Mahal in Agra (Uttar Pradesh) is one of the most popular tourist sites in the world and also the grave of the Mughal ruler Shahjehan and his wife Mumtaz Mahal. This Muslim heritage monument is kept immaculate by the ASI, where visitors will see workers actively curating gardens and occasionally archeologists conducting stability surveys. The Taj Mahal is an exception in the general exclusion of Muslim monuments from the Indian state's agenda to protect and cultivate national heritage sites.

Conclusion: Muslim Voices in Heritage Walks

This Darwesh heritage performance walk showcases a period of north Indian (and Muslim) history that is much less remembered compared to that *other* north Indian Muslim dynasty—the Mughals. It also brings participants literally into two large Tughlaq-era spaces—the Jahanpanah Fort and the Begumpur Mosque—that are crumbling away every day. These spaces are barely protected by the ASI from illegal activities and from other forms of public use that lead to their disintegration. To fill in the gap, heritage groups like Darwesh emphasize social responsibility in their work and engage the communities which house neglected sites to assist in their protection and upkeep. In small and everyday ways each heritage event that occurs in a space such as Jahanpanah is a challenge to the historical and present-day erasure of the Muslim character and contribution to Delhi's history. These monuments are recognized as testimony to Muslim contributions to North Indian history. In his ethnography of tourism at the Taj Mahal, Tim Edensor interviews a Muslim visitor who reveals what the monument means to her personally: “this is a memorial of our Muslim past. I like to come here to remember. As a Muslim in these difficult times, it gives me great heart to see the Taj and makes me feel for our past.”⁶⁶ These historical sites are evidence of the Muslim past in India that also comment on the state of Muslim belonging in Delhi's present. Lack of official interest in their upkeep is an ideological message that Muslim histories do not belong in India's living heritage. Darwesh's work in Delhi, with performances of Tughlaq and other Muslim histories, restores the voices of Muslims in local historical memory.

Despite the ways that heritage performance walks are opportunities to recover a forgotten

⁶⁶ Tim Edensor, *Tourists at the Taj: Performance and Meaning at a Symbolic Site* (London: New York: Routledge, 1998), 98.

Muslim past, the content of these representations hinders their political potential. Darwesh's mission to educate and engage communities into lost aspects of their heritage is undermined by their reliance on stereotypical representation of medieval Muslim power. Tughlaq in Darwesh's walk responds to critics skeptical of his motivations, thus empowering a figure subjected to judgement and silenced in both historiography and performance. The potential for his voice to correct how he has been evaluated is undercut when Tughlaq also articulates his presumed irrationality and stereotyped personality as an enlightened madman. While participants comment that his character is mixed, Darwesh's performance of Tughlaq is also an ambivalent depiction that forefronts conflict in how he should be understood. This performance walk suggests that at present, a commodified heritage experience based on a Muslim figure which takes place in medieval ruins is only marketable if it revives easy stereotypes of pre-modern elite Muslim irrationality and instability.

Medieval Muslims talking back to how historiography represents them is a hallmark of contemporary historical performances in Delhi both on the stage and in medieval spaces. The next chapter examines a currently running historical play on Mughal history in which these Muslim rulers respond to their critics and to the charge that they are not Indian. The Mughals were Muslims who ruled over north India for nearly four-hundred years. Historiography and modern assumptions about biology and identity influence the ways in which the Mughals are ambivalently constructed in terms of how they as individuals belong to the idea of India. Like Tughlaq, these pre-modern figures use performance to voice their response to how they have been judged in history and in the present.

Chapter Four

In Search of Muslim India: Translation, History, and Representation in *Sons of Babur*

Introduction: Muslims Choosing India

At the Fourth Plenary Session (November 1930) of the Round Table Conferences held in London to debate constitutional matters in British India, Maulana Mohammad Ali (1878-1931) spoke passionately for an independent India. The Maulana, a Muslim representative from Delhi was terminally ill, and although frail, managed to explain with wit and fervor his opinions on Indian nationhood, Hindu-Muslim discord, and the British tendency towards policies of ‘divide and rule’ that he argued were the real reason behind any religious conflict.¹ Maulana Mohammad Ali died six weeks later, in London, but was buried in Jerusalem according to his last wishes.

The comments the Maulana delivered to an official gathering of British and Indian representatives are remarkable because his was a voice from the Indian Muslim community, speaking about his identity as a Muslim and as an Indian nationalist. “One word as to the Muslim position,” he began. A few sentences later the Maulana succinctly and directly stated his opinion on the Indian Muslim position: “I have a culture, a polity, an outlook on life -- a complete synthesis which is Islam. Where God commands, I am a *Mussalman* first, a *Mussalman* second, and a *Mussalman* last, and nothing but a *Mussalman*. But where India is concerned, I am an Indian first, an Indian second, an Indian last, and nothing but an Indian.” In the Maulana’s view, when it comes to matters of national concern his identity is Indian first and foremost. It is a position that is not compromised by the fact that he is also a Muslim. His is a Muslim voice in

¹ G. Allana, *Pakistan Movement Historical Documents* (Karachi: Department of International Relations, University of Karachi, nd [1969]), pp. 61-75.

the heady years of Indian nationalism using the very public platform of the London conferences to state that he, a Muslim, is just as Indian as any other person living in the late years of British rule. That he had to make such a statement declaring a Muslim loyalty to India might have simply reflected the anxieties of those concerned with power relations once the nation would come into being.

Nearly ninety years later, the sentiment and the statement behind these words continue to apply to the Indian Muslim experience. The litmus test of Muslim belonging in India—loyalty to country—is just as applicable in the twenty-first century as it was in the early twentieth. However, in the years after the Maulana’s death the history of the subcontinent changed dramatically. India gained independence in 1947, Pakistan was created as the new homeland for Muslims of the subcontinent in that same year, and the partitioning of British India into those two nations resulted in unimaginable violence and the displacement of millions of people. Of course, not all Muslims decided to leave their homes and migrate to Pakistan. They remain today, nearly four generations after Maulana Mohammad Ali, Indian Muslims who face the same questions of loyalty and belonging that he did in 1930.

Salman Khurshid, a prominent Muslim member of the Congress party, former Minister of Minority and Corporate Affairs, a practicing advocate, and grandson of the first Muslim President of India, Zakir Hussain, has expressed his views on Indian Muslim history and belonging in several books, speeches, and also a published dramatic play. In his book *At Home in India: A Restatement of Indian Muslims*, Khurshid asks why it has been impossible for Indian Muslims to make statements about belonging and their identities as Muslims and also be taken at face value.² “On 15 August 1947, some Indians made a choice,” writes Khurshid. “The choice

² Salman Khurshid, *At Home in India: A Restatement of Indian Muslims* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1986).

was to stay home in India. These Indians were Muslims. And since then they have commonly come to be known as Indian Muslims.... the choice was a clear one. To stay at home.”³ Invoking the emotional metaphor of home, and implicitly questioning the description of Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims of the subcontinent, the determination and clarity of Maulana Mohammad Ali’s 1930 statement echoes in Khurshid’s words published many years later. Despite the fact that these Muslims were born in (British) India, and that they chose to remain there after the creation of Pakistan, their belonging to the Indian nation was under suspicion. It is because of this predicament that, in Khurshid’s view, the Muslims of India are persistently required to prove their allegiance to India as a state and a social system.⁴ With nearly sixty years and two generations between them, both Ali and Khurshid address the same questions about Muslim loyalty and belonging to India. Just as these Muslims publicly testified to their fidelity to their country, Muslim characters in staged performances talk back to history, and their contemporary audiences, to contest the terms that define them as not part of the Indian nation.

Sons of Babur (Urdu: *Babur ki Aulad*) is a play written by Salman Khurshid that creatively addresses the predicament of Indian Muslim belonging in a dramatic form. Published in 2008, the play was written by Khurshid in English.⁵ It was later translated into Hindi and Urdu, and has been produced for the stage by Dr. M. Sayeed Alam, director of the Delhi-based theatre group Pierrot’s Troupe. Promoted as a drama that takes one back to “the era and the aura” of Mughal history, the play is an attempt to reveal what the idea of “Hindustān,” today modern India, meant to the Muslims who came from Central Asia to rule over North India for nearly

³ Ibid., 21.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ Salman Khurshid, *Sons of Babur: A Play in Search of India* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2008).

three centuries. The title of the play refers to the slur that Indian Muslims are the progeny of the first Mughal ruler, Babur (ruled from 1526-30) who was a foreigner to India; as his kin, the Muslims of India are also understood as foreigners in India. The second half of this expression calls upon Indian Muslims to *wapas jao*, or go back, to the place from which they ostensibly came.

Historical drama is a genre of contemporary performance that mediates between history as it has been written, and how that past is newly understood by audiences. *Sons of Babur* is one such play that represents the motivations and commitments of the Mughal rulers who governed north India from 1526 to 1857 in order to comment on Indian Muslim belonging in the past and on contemporary identity politics. As the play makes statements about the role of the Mughals—and Muslims—to historical and contemporary India, my analysis evaluates these messages in light of several processes and patterns that characterize the production of the play as a staged performance. The ways in which Khurshid's text was developed for the stage reveals modes of translation related to assumptions about audience expectations, and the need to entertain. Similar to performances of the medieval Muslim Mohammad bin Tughlaq, the producers of this historical play also emphasize accuracy in historical performance; however, for the director Alam fidelity to history is connected to acting techniques and results in a greater authentic depiction of character. Premodern Muslim rulers in *Sons of Babur*, like Tughlaq, talk back to how they have been rendered in historiography to reveal their motivations and to have a voice in how the past and the present judges the ethics of their decisions. The emphasis in *Sons of Babur* on historical Muslim attachments to India is an intervention into South Asian historiography of the Mughal period, as these medieval rulers voice their fidelity and dramatically question the absurd logic that renders them, and by extension India's Muslims, foreigners.

I: “No Ordinary Project”: Revisiting Mughal History and Revising Muslim Belonging

Sayeed Alam of Pierrot’s Troupe first came to know about Salman Khurshid’s play in 2008. He was in the United States, in Boston, directing a production of his monologue play *Maulana Azad*. In the audience was Nadeem Tarin, who mentioned to Alam that Khurshid had written a play called *Sons of Babur* that had been staged in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. After returning to Delhi, Alam was sent the Urdu and English versions of Khurshid’s text by Ather Farooqui, translator of the play into Hindi and Urdu. Salman Khurshid had seen the *Maulana Azad* play and was impressed with the actor Tom Alter’s performance. Although Khurshid and Farooqui approached several other figures in Indian theatre to direct the play, including Nasiruddin Shah and Mahmood Farooqui, it was Alam and Pierrot’s Troupe, with Tom Alter in the lead role as Bahadur Shah Zafar, who would come to stage the play over thirty-six times (as of February 2015). An accomplished actor of Indian stage and screen, Alter often performs with Pierrot’s Troupe, and nearly always in the title character of the play. These plays are also often historical dramas based on Muslim figures in history (Maulana Azad, Bahadur Shah Zafar, and Mirza Ghalib) and they are some of the Troupe’s most popular performances. As a participant-observer during the production of *Sons of Babur*, I was cast in the role of Sarah, an Indian-American university student. To date, the play has been performed in English several times but the language of its standard performance is a mixture of Hindi, Urdu, (advertised as Hindustani) and English. During fieldwork with the Troupe, Alam cast me as the character Sarah, an Indian American student in Delhi.⁶ I performed this role, speaking both English and Hindi, several times in Delhi and Bombay.

⁶ In Khurshid’s text Sarah was born in Britain, the daughter of a British father and Indian mother. Alam changed her background simply because I was American and not British.

The play's protagonist is Rudranshu Sengupta (Rudra), a university student in contemporary Delhi. Rudra is determined to write a play on the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, who was exiled to Rangoon by the British. After being denied a grant to travel to Rangoon Rudra begins meeting with Zafar in his dreams, and together they revisit key moments in Mughal history so that Rudra can get answers to the questions that concern him the most: what did the idea of Hindustān mean to these Muslim rulers? Are all Indian Muslims really "*Babur ki aulad*," or foreign to Indian society? At the same time as Rudra is surreally experiencing the era of the Mughals, his three college friends provide a contemporary frame to the narrative as well as some comic relief. Structurally the play unites three different time periods on the same stage: episodes from Mughal history (roughly mid-sixteenth century to mid-nineteenth century), scenes from contemporary college life, and the exiled Zafar sitting with Rudra in late-1850s Rangoon.

In the first scene of Sayeed Alam's *Sons of Babur* production, the young university student Rudra is trying to convince his history professor, Dr. Das, that his plan to study modern Indian identity through the history of Bahadur Shah Zafar is worthy of research. As they discuss his project, two student groups pass them by, each shouting opposing slogans that are very familiar to Indian ears: "*Babur ki auladon wapas jao, wapas jao, wapas jao*," (Go back to where you came from, 'Sons of Babur') and "*Down with Hindutva...Hindutva hai hai...hindutva hai*" (Down with Hindu ideology...down with Hindu ideology!). Gesturing to the commotion that had passed them, Rudra presses his case with his teacher: "That is what I was trying to point out sir. My project is no ordinary project...Bahadur Shah, the very symbol of our Indian-ness, was after all, '*Babur ki aulad*' (progeny of Babur)."

In an interview when the play was first published, playwright Khurshid states that the main goal of the play is not to relive Mughal history; rather, it attempts to show the relevance of

the Mughals to the identity of modern India—not just to Muslim India, but to all of Indian society.⁷ *Sons of Babur* revisits medieval history and in so doing, makes claims about how the Mughals adopted the new land they came to rule, emphasizes the local (read as Hindu) ancestry of Muslim elites, and represents Mughal ambition and rule with both admiration and contempt. A brief review of how South Asian historiography has depicted the Mughals and specifically their identities as Muslims and political rulers reveals how scholars sought recourse to the past as they reacted to social discourse about the Muslims of their present.

II: Representation and Mughal Identities: Separatism and Syncretism

Surveys of Indian Muslim history produced in the 1960s and 1970s responded to claims and counter claims about religion and society that supported or refuted the “two-nation” theory and the creation of Pakistan. Fixated on the search for communalism’s origins and identity of the distinct categories of “Hindu” and “Muslim” in South Asia’s pre-modern past, they come to different conclusions about Mughal religious identities. One trend in this literature emphasizes a general Mughal separation and when religion and governance intersect, Muslim leaders take legalistic and juridical attitudes.⁸ In this literature the Mughals are described as socio-political figures ruling over a majority (proto) Hindu society who generally remained out of the religious affairs of their people. Babur, the first Mughal and founder of the empire in North India, tolerated non-Muslims and their religious practices that were part of his new polity.⁹ He did not

⁷ Dipanita Nath, “When A Union Minister Takes Centrestage With His Play,” *Indian Express*, 31 October, 2010. URL: <http://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/web/when-a-union-minister-takes-centrestage-with-his-play/99/>. Accessed 15 December, 2014.

⁸ Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (1964); Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims* (1967); Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*, (1962).

⁹ See Stephen F. Dale, *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483-1530)* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2004).

seek to impose his faith on his subjects, taking a passive position in matters of religious life. Babur's son and successor Humayun continued his father's non-interference in the growing empire's religious activities. I.H. Qureshi, an early Pakistani historian, claims that early Indian Mughal culture remained "mostly Islamic and Central Asian in spirit," resisting any moves to assimilate or adopt local Indic ideas or practice.¹⁰ These characterizations of Mughals as remote rulers with a chiefly juridical orientation is consistent with contemporary arguments that South Asian Muslims comprise a distinct community that is not integrated in the Indian context.

Representations of a Mughal disinterest in spiritual affairs is consistent with how R. Stephen Humphreys describes medieval Muslim political leaders as indifferent in their relationships to religious matters.¹¹ According to Humphreys, a typology of pre-modern Muslim leadership is that leaders rendered social, legal, and practical issues related to the religious nature of their citizenry as irrelevant to matters of governance and the state. This is not to say that Muslim sovereigns completely ignored religion; evidence of elite patronage of mosques, religious schools, and Sufi shrines reveals that at certain times and places they intervened in such matters. In so far as historiography characterizes early Mughal rule as separate from the religious commitments of the non-Muslims in their imperial midst, the South Asian situation conforms to wider global medieval Muslim approaches to leadership and authority.

Two Mughal emperors--Akbar and Aurangzeb--are the iconoclasts in this trend. They stand in near opposition to each other as Akbar emerges as the enlightened leader who actively integrated non-Muslim practices into his own, and Aurangzeb as a ruler staunchly intolerant of

¹⁰ Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*, 102.

¹¹ R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 153.

non-Muslims and their religious lives.¹² Thus Aziz Ahmad wonders if Akbar should be understood as a heretic or an apostate to Islam due to the sovereign's attempts at establishing a new "religion," called "*Din-i Ilahi*," (Divine Faith) and proclamations that he was indeed the *Khalifa*, or the spiritual representative of Allah on earth.¹³ In his 1964 longitudinal study of Indian Muslims, Aziz Ahmad devotes an entire chapter each to examining the "Islamic" positions of Akbar and Aurangzeb (in comparison to his mystically-minded brother and rival to the throne Dara Shikoh). Akbar was "an intensely religious person" or "rather a person desperately in search of a religion."¹⁴ His initial disposition towards Islam was as a devoted, and perhaps superficial, acceptance of tradition and orthodoxy. In 1578, Akbar experienced a spiritual crisis that caused him to shift his acceptance of Sunni orthodoxy to embracing a general eclecticism. Ahmad attributes this change to the influence of Akbar's associate Abu'l Fazl ibn Mubarak, a Mughal court historian and author of Akbar's religious philosophy, the "*Ain-i Akbari*" (*The Constitution of Akbar*).¹⁵ In that same year, the sovereign decreed that all powers of

¹² It is perhaps not incidental that of all the Mughals, it is also Akbar and Aurangzeb who are most often depicted in visual and performance cultures. Akbar's rule and romantic life are grandly portrayed in K. Asif's 1960 melodrama *Mughal-e Azam* (discussed in Chapter five), and Aurangzeb has been the subject of several plays, of those the most well-known being Indira Parthasarathy's 1974 drama *Aurangzeb*. See Parthasarathy, in G.P. Deshpande, ed., *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology* (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 2000), pps. 429-76.

¹³ Schimmel maintains that what Akbar established was an order of initiates into his ideology, and not actually a religion. See Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent*, 82.

¹⁴ Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, Chapter XI "Akbar: Heretic or Apostate?" and Chapter XIII "Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb." Akbar's personal historian offers an insider account of Akbar's administration and court relations in Abu'l Fazl ibn Mubarak, *The Akbar Nama of Abu'l Fazl: History of the Reign of Akbar Including an Account of His Predecessors*, Henry Beveridge, trans., 3 volumes (Delhi: Rare Books, 1972). For a comprehensive review of the politics and religious aspects of Akbar's rule see Sayyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign, With Special Reference to Abu'l Fazl, 1556-1605* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1975). Irfan Habib's edited collection of essays includes several analyses of Akbar's personality and philosophical worldview. See Habib, ed., *Akbar and His India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997). J.F. Richard's edited volume places Akbar's approach to kingship in context of broader historical and social developments, including later Mughal rulers. See Richards, ed., *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, second ed., (Madison, WI.: South Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1981).

¹⁵ Abu'l Fazl ibn Mubarak, *A'in-i Akbari*, 3 vols., H. Blochmann, trans. (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1877).

interpretation and application of Islamic law were to be taken from the ‘ulama and placed under his personal charge.¹⁶

Akbar’s moves to integrate proto-Hindu practices into his personal religious practice are evidence for historians of an enlightened Mughal acceptance of the mixed religious character of medieval North India. His marriage to a Rajput Hindu princess and his tolerance of *puja* rituals within the royal household emphasize his worldview and efforts to create an empire strengthened by its religious diversity.¹⁷ Ahmad describes Akbar’s interest in rituals associated with what is contemporary Hinduism as an intellectual curiosity.¹⁸ His fifty year rule over an expansive area running from Kabul and Qandahar in the west to Bengal in the east stands out as a “daring experiment in eclecticism” for Indian Islam.¹⁹ The next two successors to Akbar, his son Salim (later Jahangir) and grandson Shah Jahan generally continued Akbar’s socio-political policies with less lofty ideas about their religious station. In terms of this trend in historiography these Mughals receive far less attention than their radical relatives.

Aurangzeb is represented as the later conservative reaction to enlightened Mughal rule. He is the un-mystical anti-thesis to his older brother Dara Shikoh, who in Aurangzeb’s lifetime is understood as the inheritor of Akbar’s legacy. Ahmad diagnoses this Mughal approach as one of “theocratic particularism,” because the sovereign at the same time sought a moral reconstruction of Muslim communities and actively suppressed Muslims who he came to know participated in

¹⁶ Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, 170.

¹⁷ This marriage and Akbar’s open-minded approach are lavishly reproduced in Ashutosh Gowariker’s 2008 commercial Hindi film *Jodhaa Akbar*, and is also the subject of a currently-running (2015-16) Hindi television serial on the Zee Channel also titled “Jodha Akbar.”

¹⁸ Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, 176.

¹⁹ Ibid., 167.

non-Muslim religious practices.²⁰ He prohibited pilgrimage to saint shrines, a popularity especially among women, as well as public processions commemorating the battle of Karbala during the Islamic month of Muharram. Known in popular lore as a destroyer of Hindu temples, Ahmad contends that Aurangzeb ordered their destruction if he discovered any Muslim use of them.²¹ Intellectually he was concerned with legal matters and juridical doctrine, commissioning in 1671 the *Fatawa-i 'Alamgiri*, a comprehensive digest of Hanafi jurisprudence.

To counter contemporary claims of inherent Muslim separatism, other scholarship of the Mughal period projects an elite effort at cultivating interfaith unity to support Mughal authority. These historians characterize periods of Mughal social life as institutionalizing Muslim and Hindu mutual interaction and beneficial co-existence. Mohammad Mujeeb presents an Indian nationalist argument that adherence to Islam is the major source of Muslim unity, a fact that should not be confused for political and legal separatism.²² His descriptions of Mughal rule emphasize Hindu participation and support for what was an insecure political dominance. Pre-modern Hindu beliefs and practices were adopted by Mughal elites and came to embody a common (north Indian) culture.²³ Mujeeb, a Vice-Chancellor at what was at his time of writing a newly established Jamia Millia Islamia University (originally established as a nationalist institution for Indian Muslims), projects not separatism but interfaith unity in his survey of the South Asian Muslim past. He represents the post-independence, nationalist view of Muslim syncretism and emphasizes Hindu influences on Muslim culture and social institutions.

²⁰ Ibid., 196-98.

²¹ Ibid., 198.

²² Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, 23.

²³ Ibid., 379.

Studies in South Asian historiography produced in the wake of Partition sought to connect contemporary ideological arguments about Muslim identities with figures and episodes from the Mughal past. In his review of this historiography, Richard Eaton concludes that writers like Ahmad and Qureshi were eager to make legitimate the assumptions about faith, nationalism, and citizenship that produced the new states of India and Pakistan.²⁴ Thus a historian like Ahmad is pressed to find the medieval roots of separatism based on faith affiliation in order to support communal interpretations of South Asian society dominant at the time of his writing. This reading of history supports prevalent stereotypes about Muslim identity and practice as exclusive, rigid, and intolerant. Subsequent studies seek to reverse this narrative about Mughals and Indian Muslims at a time of extensive change in India.

III: Representation and Mughal Identities: Adaptation and Integration

Developments in the 1990s brought significant social and economic changes to Indian society. The demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, part of a longer Hindu nationalist agenda, set off a series of violent responses that led to more death and destruction. The decision by the Congress-led government to open up the national economy to foreign development and investment in 1991 initiated a new period of liberalization that opened up social and cultural production to global forces.²⁵ Historiography produced in this context responded to earlier constructions of the pre-modern past as communal with evidence of Mughal and Muslim accommodation, adaptation, and flexibility.

²⁴ Richard M. Eaton, “Introduction,” in Richard M. Eaton, ed., *India’s Islamic Traditions, 711-1750* (Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 1-34; 13-14.

²⁵ For more on the national political economy during this period of Congress governance see Francine Frankel, *India’s Political Economy 1947-2004* (Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Rudolph and Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi* (1987).

Two edited collections published in the early 2000s—Richard M. Eaton’s *India’s Islamic Traditions*, and David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence’s *Beyond Turk and Hindu*—are important works that determinedly move away from fixed notions of community and religious community when analyzing the Mughal period. In contrast to Qureshi’s contention that Indian Islam remained at a distance from local practices to remain essentially Central Asian, Richard Eaton identifies a “double-movement” between the local cultures of South Asia and the universal norms of Islam: “India was hardly unique...from the seventh century on, Muslims everywhere had been engaged in projects of cultural accommodation, appropriation, and assimilation, which had the effect of transforming what had begun as an Arab cult into what we call a world religion.”²⁶ Gilmartin and Lawrence emphasize flexibility, dynamic interactions between the local and the universal, and discrete processes of change in how scholars should understand religious identities in precolonial South Asia. They acknowledge that while claims of an inherent communalism may be appropriate at certain times and in particular places, it is just as valid that interplay and overlap between Islamicate (taking from Hodgson) and Indic dispositions characterized social and religious life.²⁷ Thus the essays included in these works revisit the Mughal past and complicate the categories of “Hindu” and “Muslim” by looking at developments in art, architecture, literature, political rule, and devotional practice throughout the subcontinent.

²⁶ Eaton, “Introduction,” 6.

²⁷ David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence, “Introduction,” in Gilmartin and Lawrence, eds., *Beyond Turk and Hindu*, pps. 1-20; 2-4. See Marshall G.S. Hodgson’s three volume *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) for explanation of the category “Islamicate,” and for his theorization of the development of a global Islamicate civilization.

Within this trend in the literature historians have presented revisionist histories of several concepts and figures from the pre-modern period. Muzaffar Alam reconsiders the importance of the *shari'a*, or principles of legal guidance, for several Mughal rulers. Strict adherence to the *shari'a* has been part of a politicized stereotype of modern Muslim selfhood that is often projected onto the medieval past. Mujeeb, for example, in his study emphasized the all-encompassing role that *shari'a* played in this period for the maintenance of a Muslim group identity to resist the forces of assimilation.²⁸ Alam counters with evidence of new materials that sought to influence the legal and moral dispositions of medieval political rulers. Some of this literature, like the Persian-language *akhlāq* texts, competed with juridical norms to influence political and religious ideas.²⁹ This literature, and the Persian language broadly, were used by Mughal authorities to govern a diverse and heterogeneous society while the abstract principles of the *shari'a* remained a necessary reference point. He contends that Mughal political rule and its Islamic culture must be understood as influenced by a diverse set of ideologies that effectively remained universal and non-sectarian in its approach.³⁰ Here Mughal political and religious ethics are dislodged from simply upholding *shari'a* norms and reconsidered as compromising a diverse set of sources used to govern a mixed polity.

Scholarship on the first two Mughal rulers, Babur and Humayun, has characterized their approach towards the religious practices of their citizenry as indifferent. However, in his research on idioms of sacred kingship in pre-modern Persia and Mughal India A. Azfar Moin

²⁸ Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, 57-78.

²⁹ See Chapter two, “*Shari'a, Akhlaq*, and Governance,” in Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India, 1200-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pps. 26-80.

³⁰ Muzaffar Alam, “State Building Under the Mughals: Religion, Culture, Politics,” *Cahiers d'Asie centrale* 34, 1997, 105-128; 122.

reveals how these two figures were known for their mystical practices, and deeply influenced by North Indian Sufi orders. Mughal attachments were informed by the diversity of practices in Central Asia and Persia, and were eager to incorporate Indic sources of spiritual authority as they gradually conceived of their own style of leadership. It is from the memoirs of Gulbadan, daughter of Babur, that the story of her father's supplication to Allah and his intercession on behalf of his dying son Humayun was first made known.³¹ This episode and many others are evidence according to Moin of a pattern of Mughal kingship part of which necessitated rulers interacting with embodied symbols and performing shared myths, such as astrology, miracles, alchemy, and sorcery.³² These two Mughals cultivated contacts within the Shattari Sufi order, based in the Gwalior region and known for their mastery of astrology and knowledge of local yogic idioms of power.³³ These mystical performances and practices of Babur and Humayun revise conclusions of their indifference and suggest how their religious identities intersected with their political authority. As newcomers to North India, early Mughals performed their spiritualties in part to demonstrate temporal and divine authority for a society diverse in its religious practices.

Reconsidering characterizations of Aurangzeb as the legalist anti-thesis to Mughal tolerance and adaptation are another development in recent historiography. Several studies revisit accusations that the Mughal ruler actively targeted Hindu temples because of a personal religious zeal. Catherine Asher provides a number of instances to show that these sites were more often

³¹ This episode is dramatically re-enacted in Alam's script of *Sons of Babur*, Act II, scene two.

³² A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), "The Alchemical Court," 96-131.

³³ Ibid., 97.

than not destroyed for political reasons, usually to punish local rebellions against administrative authorities.³⁴ One such example is Aurangzeb's supposed order to destroy the Buddhist carvings located inside the Ellora caves (in present-day Maharashtra). To complicate depictions of this Mughal as fervently anti-Hindu, Asher gives evidence of rewards given to Hindus loyal to the state, as well as imperial support for non-Muslim religious sites throughout his time in power. Richard Eaton has also revised assumptions of Muslim desecration of Hindu temples by revealing how non-Muslim rulers also targeted and demolished these sites, as well as the material motives for engaging in such activity.³⁵

Aurangzeb's famous prohibition on musical performances in 1668 is used to support arguments of larger cultural and religious despotism during his rule. Katherine Butler Brown's study of the historiography of the supposed ban on music reveals that the nature of his leadership was less orthodox and oppressive than scholarship and popular lore has represented it. Her assessment of the fixation with music and performances during this time is that Aurangzeb decided to cultivate a style of personal piety that included abstention from musical gatherings and performers (it is suggested that this was in part due to the death of his Hindu lover Hirabai, herself a dancer).³⁶ While the ruler himself chose practices of self-discipline and austerity, this did not translate into wider policies of governance. Reassessments of Aurangzeb within scholarship are important to dispelling long-standing notions of his supposed recourse to "orthodoxy" in order to restore the moral character of South Asian Muslim society. Depictions of

³⁴ Catherine Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 254.

³⁵ Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," pps. 246-281.

³⁶ In *Sons of Babur* Aurangzeb appears in only one late scene, in which he is drafting a farewell letter to an associate. In his prose he refutes that he oppressed culture and non-Muslim religious life, and testifies to his love for the Hindu woman Hirabai.

his leadership as austere and reactionary are part of a larger narrative of late Mughal decline, which supposedly created the conditions for British incursions and later colonial rule. And stereotypes of Aurangzeb as the epitome of a medieval, violently anti-Hindu Muslim political rule remain relevant to social life in India today. The controversial removal of Aurangzeb's name from a major thoroughfare in Lutyen's Delhi in August 2015 revived debates about stereotypes of his character, and the contemporary consequences for Indian Muslims.³⁷

This overview of Mughal religious identities in scholarship marks important trends in representation of Muslim elites in South Asia's medieval past. In reaction to the "separate community, separate nation" argument that supported the creation of Pakistan, early scholarship searched for the pre-modern origins of fixed Muslim separatism and diagnosed the first Mughals as indifferent to non-Muslim society, and determinedly Central Asian in character. A subsequent trend in the literature revised the communal thesis to instead argue that Mughal rulers adopted some aspects of proto-Hindu practice and in general, assimilated themselves to local conditions. A Mughal Muslim identity characterized as orthodox and sectarian gave way to visions of a dialogical process of identity construction, drawing from both normative Islamic ideas and local Indic values. These arguments are very much in conversation with increasing communal violence in urban North Indian cities, during which Muslims were often targeted. In historiography, Mughal identities are indexed according to their socio-religious policies, as well as their personal conceptions of religious and spiritual authority.

There are some continuities in how the Mughals are represented in staged performance and in the annals of history. As I show in my analysis of the play later in this chapter, an ethics

³⁷ For more on the removal see Dinyar Patel, "Renaming Aurangzeb Road is a Terrible Memorial to APJ Kalam," published online at *Scroll.in*. URL: <http://scroll.in/article/752463/renaming-aurangzeb-road-is-a-terrible-memorial-to-apj-kalam>. Accessed September 1, 2015.

of Mughal kingship in *Sons of Babur* is determined by the ways in which Muslim rulers treat their non-Muslim (read as Hindu) subjects. The question of whether adherence to Islam prohibits a Mughal ruler to also be an impartial sovereign is raised and debated in several scenes of the play. Just as the first Mughal ruler Babur performed his temporal and spiritual authority for his new polity, in *Sons of Babur* the Mughals are called to defend themselves and literally perform their loyalties to India. This embodied demonstration of fidelity is how performance intervenes in the historiography of how the Mughals conceived of their religious and social authority. Mughal rulers voice their commitments to their people and to their faith, and they question the incongruities that construe them as foreign to India. Missing from the historiography yet key to the play *Sons of Babur* are the voices of Mughals who interrupt discourse that equates being Muslim with not being Indian.

IV: Acting Theory and Method in Contemporary Theatre

In drama theory, method acting is a set of techniques used by actors to enact a depiction of the character they play that is as precise as possible. The actor, director, and instructor Lee Strasberg is credited with developing “The Method,” or method acting, as a practice that remains popular today. His techniques are inspired by ideas about method as formulated by Constantin Stanislavski, an actor and director working in Russian theatre in the early twentieth century. Stanislavski’s approach was part of a realist movement in theatre that recognized perfection in acting which draws from an intellectual and emotional empathy with a role in order to convey “truth.” The actor develops a more authentic representation of their character drawing from attempts to experience or live through their character’s situation. In Stanislavski’s theory imagination is a key process method actors use to motivate the questions that will inform their

emphatic embodiment. “A character does not have a full biography,” according to Stanislavski, and thus the task of the actor is to find necessary details either from the performance text, or must create these specifics him or herself.³⁸ This method emphasizes the idea of experience, or as Stanislavski described, “live through,” as an essential process wherein actors train to literally experience the emotions of their character when performing the emotional and physical act of representation.³⁹

Critics of method acting fault its fixed characterization, emphasis on the actor at the expense of the text, and claim that these techniques are narrowly useful for realist presentations. Bertolt Brecht’s “epic theatre” was a challenge to Stanislavski’s approach, emphasizing distance between the audience and actors and non-conformity instead of the naturalism of the method.⁴⁰ Despite these criticisms the method remains a popular practice with performers outside of academic training.⁴¹ In his role as director of Pierrot’s Troupe, Sayeed Alam’s training techniques are inspired by method acting practice. He encourages actors to both intellectually and cognitively identify with the experience of their characters. Because these roles are historical ones, to bridge the gap in experience Alam prioritizes historical knowledge, which leads to an informed experience and ultimately a more authentic performance.

³⁸ Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, trans. (New York: Theatre Arts Inc., 1936), 51-67.

³⁹ Ibid., 14, 19.

⁴⁰ See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, John Willett ed. and trans. (London, Methuen, 1964).

⁴¹ David Krasner, “I Hate Strasberg: Method Bashing in the Academy,” in David Krasner, ed., *Method Acting Reconsidered: Theory, Practice, Future* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pps. 1-42; 8.

V: Processes of Translating *Sons of Babur* for the Stage

Bringing Salman Khurshid's published text *Sons of Babur* to the stage involved translation of the text from English to Hindi-Urdu, modifying characterization, and including new dialogues in several scenes. According to the director Alam, the requirements of proscenium stage theatre—in his words, stagecraft—called for these changes to the Khurshid text. While Alam's script is certainly an adaptation of Khurshid's play, to analyze the changes as examples of translation allows a focus on the strategies, choices, and implications of his adaptation. Making the text into a stageable script involved different modes of translation: as reduction, as gain, and as untranslatable. The consequences of these modifications of the play both expand the reach of Khurshid's text, yet they also reduce and delete some aspects of his creative agenda.

In Alam's assessment, his alterations of the published English text were all meant to make the text stageable. The historical scenes of Mughal rulers in the play are all nearly the same in the English text and Alam's stage script, however most of these scenes were scaled back to simply their essential themes and key dialogues. Alam described his intervention with these parts of the play as that of reduction, noting that if in Khurshid's text an entire paragraph was meant to convey a core idea, he would reduce the sentences to one or two for his play. When he and I discussed the need to adapt Khurshid's play, Alam connected this task to the state of producing drama as a published text and as a staged event. He blames a disconnect between those who write plays, and those who produce and direct them for staged performances. “It used to be that playwrights often also staged their plays,” Alam told me. When writers and producers operate in different spheres of creative production, plays get published that are completely un-stageable, usually due to length.

Alam made key changes to the interaction between the inquisitive student Rudra and his guide Bahadur Shah Zafar. In Khurshid's English text the dynamic between the two is similar to that of equals discussing the details of Mughal personalities, their political choices, and connections to Rudra's contemporary Indian context. Alam found this relationship unfavorable because, in his assessment, it was too academic and therefore not very entertaining. A key characteristic of Alam's script therefore is a humorous interaction between the deposed Mughal ruler languishing in Rangoon and his curious student Rudra. Much of the humor Alam worked into his script are linguistic puns related to Rudra's Bengali-accented Hindi, which Bahadur Shah Zafar at first finds very strange and insulting to his own refined Urdu. In their first interaction, Zafar is confused that someone claiming to be from Delhi would speak with such a strange accent:

Rudra: I am going...*Johanponah*...but I am...your Delhi... (he starts to go off)

Zafar: Delhi? Wait...if you have come from Delhi then stop...whomever you are, a British spy, or traveler, or stranger, you've come from Delhi...no, how could you have come from Delhi. Those of the Delhi of Ustad Zauq and Mirza Ghalib don't say "*Johanponah*"...⁴²

He chastises Rudra, which is only fitting since Zafar himself was a man of letters and an Urdu poet. While their initial scenes are characterized by this same judgmental dynamic, by the end of the play Zafar has become quite fond of the Rudra's stereotypically accented speech, insisting that the student call him "*Johaponah*," a Bengali-accented pronunciation of the Urdu "*Jehanpanah*" (literally "refuge of the world," a title usually used to describe medieval rulers). This translation is more than simply a play on accents; the Mughal ruler's insult at hearing such language betrays a bias towards Urdu—in a high Persianized register—in the aesthetic taste of North Indian elites.

⁴² Unless otherwise specified, all translations of the Alam script are my own.

Presenting the play in Hindustani, and not English, allowed Alam to play with the language in his translation for the stage. He felt that this type of change was necessary to creating a sense of difference between the two characters living nearly one hundred and fifty years apart. “I thought why not play with the language. If you are portraying people from two entirely different eras, sitting there and talking to each other, there should be some contrast in their respective languages.” Audiences find this back and forth between the ‘high’ language of the exiled King and the ‘low’ language of his student Rudra both an entertaining aspect of Alam’s play and, in the words of one reviewer, an example of “low comedy at best.”⁴³

An important change that Alam created for his stage script is a scene between Bahadur Shah Zafar and Rudra, where the university student mentions the contemporary stereotype of all Indian Muslims as “*Babur ki aulad*.” This exchange is unique to the staged script and not in Khurshid’s text. In Act II, scene two, Rudra confesses to the old King that the question that has worried him the most was doubts about the Indian (Hindustāni) identity of the Mughals. Zafar does not comprehend the nature of the question, and Rudra explains that in today’s India, Indian Muslims are all considered as foreigners, like Babur was, because he was born and buried outside of the subcontinent. The doubt cast on his self-understanding as both Indian and Muslim angers Zafar, and he goes into a lengthy defense of his identity based on his ancestry. He defiantly notes that Mughal princes were encouraged to marry local, Rajput princesses with the implication that this was an active approach to integration between Hindus and Muslims. Rudra quickly interrupts to disagree and instead maintain that these were choices based on political ambition.

⁴³ Reviewed for *Time Out Delhi*. See URL: <http://fanapart.blogspot.in/2011/02/sons-of-babur-review.html>.

Alam's translation of this scene opens up space for several key themes running throughout the play. The first is Rudra's specific mention of the phrase "*Babur ki aulad*" that otherwise is not directly in Khurshid's text in terms of its connotations and assumptions. The second product of Alam's revision is a vivid debate, discussed in detail later in this chapter, between Mughal king and Indian student on whether the ideology and agenda of Mughal courtly rule and life were narrowly and selfishly political, or also examples of their efforts to integrate and adopt themselves to local, majority Hindu, populations. These processes of translation generated new content and broadened the socio-political message of Khurshid's text through debates on identity and inclusion that also comment on contemporary identity politics in India.

Translation as Radical Difference: Adapting College Life for the Stage

That need to insert humor into the published play underlies many of the ways in which Alam translated the contemporary college scenes of Khurshid's text. These scenes, featuring Rudra and his three Delhi University friends Aftaab, Sarah, and Prabhat, serve as the modern frame of the play and give context to Rudra's quest to research Mughal history and Indian Muslim belonging. In Khurshid's prose, the students are eloquent and inquisitive, debating both theoretical ideas (such as the Subaltern Studies project and Marxism) and contemporary politics (specifically the rise of Hindu nationalism starting in the mid-1990s). When Rudra comes to his friends to announce his project and intentions to write a play, Aftaab and Prabhat are skeptical while Sarah is encouraging. Later in the play, Rudra has written a draft script and together the four friends stage several dramatic readings on campus.

Alam described these characters and their interactions as written by Khurshid as not very entertaining and too academic. He diagnosed his dislike as a matter of characterization: Rudra is

supposed to be a university student, yet he is quite well versed in theoretical matters and political ideologies such as Marxism and secularism. Alam was unconvinced of these depictions of college students, who in his reading speak the playwright's language. His comments on this problem with the Khurshid text relate back to authorial intent and what makes characters enjoyable:

As a playwright--and this is my difference with most playwrights--as a playwright, you have to be neutral. You don't have to put across your ideology, your thoughts, your philosophy, your worldview, through your characters. As the playwright you have to detach yourself from your characters. But the flaw with this particular work (*Sons of Babur*), and many other plays, is that the playwright creates a good number of characters, and all of those characters represent the playwright's viewpoint. And so there is hardly any characterization.

But, I pressed Alam, isn't that often the very reason why an author chooses to write—that they have a viewpoint to get across? Yes, he agreed and said that when he writes plays himself he often has a social message in mind. Yet the difference for him is how that message is conveyed through characters to the reader. "If you are writing a play, if you are writing a piece of fiction, you must put across your message very subtly. Subtly, indirectly, and intelligently. It should not come through only in the garb of the character... when I am reading the playwright should not at all be in my subconscious."

His skepticism with the characterization of the four college students resulted in the major way in which his script differs from Khurshid's text. In Alam's play the college scenes serve primarily as comic relief in what is otherwise a fairly dense historical drama. When I asked Alam to explain why he chose to translate the student characters and college scenes in the way that he did, he again spoke about their unbelievable intelligence level and said that he adapted the dialogues to make these students speak about the same issues "indirectly" and "a little unintelligently". His understanding was that to give shape and personality to these characters he needed to insert more joking and leg-pulling indicative of the type of personal relationships the

students have. “You don’t have to use them as instruments. You have to use them as living and lively characters.”

This translation resulted in radical differences between the contemporary scenes of the two texts. The changes that Alam made concern the nature of the relations between the students. In Khurshid’s text the friends do joke and occasionally poke fun at Rudra and his claims to be experiencing Mughal history in his dreams. Yet they also debate, discuss, and importantly, learn from each other. Aftaab is Muslim, and his character serves as the Muslim voice commenting on the contemporary situation of Indian Muslims. At times, Rudra asks Aftaab directly to testify to how Muslims in India feel in the current social and political climate that constantly questions their patriotism to India. The debate and discussion between the students allows for some exchange over Rudra’s reading of Mughal history, and for its relevance for the student’s contemporary lives. The erasure of the “academic” content of exchanges between the students also removed opportunities for the audience to hear and evaluate some of the more political content of the play.

How Alam translated the character Sarah from Khurshid’s text to his script is another example of when a concept is untranslatable. One of the more robust characters in Khurshid’s play became a simple, one-dimensional personality in the staged play. In my estimation as the actor performing Sarah, the role had become that of the female friend reminding her male friends to either stop making fun of Rudra, or to go to class. Her qualities as an outsider (born and raised outside of India) who nevertheless takes Rudra on a journey of spiritual discovery through her education and interactions with Sufi teachers were un-translatable for the staged version.⁴⁴ The unintelligibility of the role was not primarily due to the need to reduce characterization; as Alam

⁴⁴ Khurshid, *Sons of Babur*, 115-122.

understood, the qualities of Sufism expressed in Khurshid's play were unrecognizable. The opportunity to empower a foreign female character with the task of introducing her Indian friend, and audiences of the performance, to Sufism was lost in the act of translation.

Modes of Translation in the Name of Stagecraft

Focusing on how and why elements of Salman Khurshid's published play were translated for Alam's stage adaptation brings into focus how concepts and values move across the boundaries of genre. The qualities of a play in text form, published in a book format in English, allowed Khurshid to be expansive in his narrative and in his characterization. As the play moved to an embodied performance in Hindi and Urdu, its narrative and many aspects of characterization were significantly reduced. This meant that elements of complexity were erased as the text moved into the genre of performance script. In addition to minimizing Sarah's role and her and Rudra's experience with a Sufi teacher, Alam decided not to include several scenes from Khurshid's play wherein Rudra, Sarah, and their friends rehearse parts of Rudra's developing play.⁴⁵ The subtext to the students' enactment of medieval roles conflates their present with debates on religion and belonging with the Mughal past. In eliminating these scenes Alam's script loses some of the complexities and signification that Khurshid developed in his version.

Translation of the play resulted in gains as well, because it now reaches theatre audiences. Khurshid's published play was limited in its field of expression because of its format as an English work. In a very literal way, Alam's work with *Sons of Babur* has allowed the core story to reach new communities—throughout India, and in Europe. Each time that the play is staged by Pierrot's Troupe it becomes a new “telling” in Ramanujan's sense of the term. In

⁴⁵ Ibid., 33-37 and 100-103.

rehearsals, dialogues are rewritten and scenes are altered to fit the specific needs of a one-time performance. In this way, Alam's efforts to rework the script and perform new tellings continue to give the Khurshid text new lives in new contexts.

VI: Rehearsing *Sons of Babur*: History and Experience in a Revisionist Play

As part of my research and preparation to act in the play, I observed and participated in rehearsals for *Sons of Babur* on a daily basis in the weeks leading up to each performance. During rehearsals I observed that Alam as the director and his actors give a high importance to getting the history “right.” This is especially true for a play like *Sons of Babur*. While most Indians are familiar with the basics of Mughal history, the play—and the Troupe—are aware of the role they play in educating audiences with aspects of that history that are lesser known, or misunderstood. Similar to how the Darwesh team conducts research for their heritage walks, Alam researches the subjects and historical contexts as part of the process of developing plays. There is a similar expectation in both of these historical performance genres that the content will reflect general knowledge and possibly reveal aspects of history previously unknown to audiences. For Pierrot’s Troupe, the effort to be correct with history has another function, related to how Alam understands the role of knowledge of the past to an actor’s authenticity in the present.

How historical knowledge relates to acting performance became evident one evening in rehearsals. We were spending time on a scene from the late 17th century, set in the large and ornate Red Fort in Agra, North India. Here the former Mughal ruler Shahjahan (ruled 1628-58) lies imprisoned by his son Aurangzeb (ruled 1658-1707), then ruler of the empire. The elderly and pained Shahjahan is being cared for by his daughter Jehanara, who has taken her father’s side in this family dispute. Along with the others present for this rehearsal, I watched as the

actors playing Shahjahan and Jehanara practiced the dialogues for the scene that represents discord and power relations in the family:

(Shahjahan begins to weep. Jehanara also starts to cry)

Jehanara: If only you could show the same courage which you had shown to your stepmother...that bravery which led to the ruin of her plans to establish Prince Sheheryaar on the throne!

Shahjahan: For that your elderly and infirm father would need to be reborn as a youth...*(pauses)*. My dearest, innocent daughter.... you forget that youth doesn't return after it has passed...and once one has become aged it is impossible to turn the clock back.

(An officer of the court enters the room)

Shahjahan: *(startled)* You have brought back the *Shamshir-e Alamgir* (royal sword)?

Officer: The Regent (Aurangzeb) has declared, "I do not want the sword..." *(hesitates)*

Shahjahan: Speak!

(The officer is silent)

Shahjahan: Speak!

(The officer remains silent)

Shahjahan: Speak, or you will not live long for this silence! (he grabs a walking cane in an attempt to stand)

Officer: The Regent says, "I do not want the sword, I want control of the Empire."

Shahjahan: *(in anger)* Never! (his body begins to visibly quake with frustration)

Jehanara: Father of mine, surviving King, please keep your lust for power in check.

Shahjahan: (to the officer) Leave! And tell that illegitimate successor...my tomb is already present in the Taj Mahal, and upon my death it will not be in my authority.... go and tell that very courageous prince that if he is able to win every war that he enters then come, come and fight with me.... go! Go! He needs to receive this message immediately...go, go!

Alam watched the scene intently, waiting for a pause during which he could give his comments.

When that time came, Alam directed his feedback to the actor playing the elderly Shahjahan, asking, "Do you know the background to this scene?" "Yes, I do," the actor replied. "Okay, what is it?" The actor hesitated and then relayed what he knew to be the historical facts of his scene:

“Aurangzeb got rid of his brother Dara Shikoh and then kept his father imprisoned in the Fort that he (the father) had built.” Alam affirmed the actor’s statement and continued to speak about how the actions of Aurangzeb, his child, had contributed to the moral outrage of Shahjahan.

While the history lesson in effect ended there, a detail not mentioned is that Aurangzeb did not only imprison his father in his own Fort; he was confined a room from which he could gaze at the mausoleum that he had built for his late wife, Mumtaz Mahal—the famous Taj Mahal monument. This was a most cruel and unusual imprisonment for a man who used to rule over much of North India, who had hosted numerous European officials at his court, and had ordered the construction of the sixth historical city of Delhi, still known today as *Shahjahanabad* (city of Shahjahan).

A few weeks later this scene of imprisonment and familial power relations was again the focus of critique in rehearsals. This time, Alam interrupted the scene to tell the actor playing the elderly Shahjahan that he wasn’t getting the body movements correct. In this scene, the actor is required to stand up slowly and with some difficulty, only to take a few steps and fall to the floor. Alam reminded the actor playing Shahjahan that his character is an old man, an elderly man, who would be obviously pained in these movements. He went on to ask if he knew what Shahjahan’s age was in this scene. The actor looked a little confused, and quickly a few of the others observing the rehearsal took out their smart phones to do some basic Internet research. In just a few minutes, a fellow actor retrieved the exact birth and death dates of Shahjahan. A group discussion began, and together the Troupe agreed that the Mughal ruler must have been in his mid-seventies when this imprisonment occurred.

These moments from the weeks of preparation leading to the first *Sons of Babur* show are times when the play’s director Alam emphasized the historical background of a scene or a

character when he was seeking a different performance from his actors. It was not enough to simply know one's lines, or have correct timing. Alam often interrupted a scene to remind the group that, "this is a historical play. There is a story behind each and every line!" Thus along with proper timing, positioning, and memorization of dialogues, knowledge of history is an essential pedagogical strategy for staging a historical play.

While the rationale for this approach did not come up in our group discussions, I came to understand that an actor's understanding of historical knowledge was thought to produce the correct emotional performance. If an actor isn't aware of the historical facts of his or her role, then they are unable to connect to the proper emotion in order to improve their performance. The connection between proper performance and knowledge of history produces an insight that is otherwise impossible to achieve through other training. It is not enough to simply have memorized one's dialogues; rather, an actor must have everyday experience of his or her character gained through an understanding of history. Alam's focus on acquiring knowledge and practice through rehearsal is an approach to performance that acknowledges the intervening role that this historical play about Indian Muslim rulers performs in how audiences rethink what they know about Muslim belonging, past and present.

History after History Lesson

The December 14, 2014 performance of *Sons of Babur* in Delhi was the first time that the Troupe had performed this play in a while; in fact, it had been nearly one and a half years. Since that show, many of the actors in the Troupe had either moved on or for other reasons were not part of this coming production. This meant that intense rehearsals were necessary, starting around one month prior to the opening show, and nearly every night of the week that there wasn't a different performance scheduled. Many of the actors initially struggled with the

required memorization of lines that is essential for performance, and in the first week of rehearsals Alam often pointed out that people still hadn't memorized their dialogues.

And in the course of sitting through rehearsals for this play for over three months, I found that many of the actors in Pierrot's Troupe had internalized this emphasis on knowing history in order to achieve proper acting form. During one evening of rehearsals we focused on a scene between the Mughal ruler Akbar and his wife, Jodhabai. The two are standing on a verandah in their palace, gazing over the countryside, when Akbar notices smoke rising in the distance. He queries his wife about the smoke and she confirms that Hindu women are self-immolating in protest against an anticipated military action against their Rajput community. The queen Jodhabai herself comes from this community, thus making her comments on the scene authoritative. The context to this scene is Akbar's legendary integrationist approach to the mixed religious population of his empire. It is well known that Akbar had married (at least one) Rajput woman who practiced proto-Hinduism within the royal palaces, with the encouragement of her Muslim husband.

That evening this scene had been rehearsed several times, and it was clear that the woman playing Jodhabai was a bit hesitant in her performance. Alam had already asked her a few times to be more serious, more grave, in her tone. After another try, she herself stopped the rehearsal to ask Alam to explain to her the historical background behind the scene. She mentioned that she had done some research herself but still couldn't understand what had happened and thus, how she should be feeling with the dialogues. The brief discussion that followed noted her character's relationship with her husband and how her religious affiliation would cause her to empathize with these women's actions. The actors rehearsed the scene again and had improved their emotional performance. Actors stopping mid-scene to review the details of their historical

character did not happen every rehearsal. Over time it was clear to me that some actors were interested in these historical details more than others. A few mentioned to me in the course of casual conversation that they had personally done some research on the role they were assigned. Rehearsals would often end with an extended history lesson from Alam, and these discussions were frequently prompted by questions from the actors themselves.

I spoke with Alam about his emphasis on knowing history with his actors. He explained that with every actor he first gauges their knowledge of history and assesses their general intelligence level. “I come to know that either I will have to teach him or her each and every moment of the play. Or, he or she is intelligent enough that you only have to inspire him or her. You only have to narrate the character.” Intelligence is not enough, however, as Alam said to me many times that rehearsing dialogues is necessary no matter how bright an actor is. “Rehearsals are most important. If I am super intelligent, even then if I have not rehearsed my plays, my lines...if I have not thought about my character, if I have not thought about the entire play, I can only give an average performance. And if I am a super fool, and I have rehearsed a lot, then I can give better than an average performance.” Alam’s theorizing on method and acting prioritizes competence in historical background and professionalism: attending rehearsals, learning one’s lines, and participating in group feedback. His assessment of an actor’s intellect suggests that this aspect of his theory is more of a subjective estimate than it is an objective diagnosis.

Connecting the Mughal medieval past to modern India’s present was another pattern that emerged in our rehearsals. One evening, we were practicing the final historical scene of the play, wherein the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb has an extended monologue. He is alone writing a letter on what will be the last night of his life. In the letter Aurangzeb is reflecting on his accomplishments, a few times expressing remorse and regret. He mentions an impossible love

affair with a Hindu dancer named Heera Bai. One evening rehearsals ended with a run through of this scene, and Alam held forth on a discussion about Aurangzeb for at least twenty minutes afterwards. The actor playing the role of Aurangzeb asked Alam if indeed it was historically true that the Mughal ruler had been in love with a Hindu dancer. This seemed unbelievable to the actors because of how Aurangzeb has become the symbolic figure in Indian history for intolerance, and stands in for a stereotype of Muslim conservative orthodoxy.⁴⁶ That he had seemingly betrayed his orthodox principles seemed unbelievable to these actors, many of whom had grown up in a post-Babri mosque, north Indian context.

This impromptu history lesson covered more than simply the facts of Aurangzeb's life and achievements. Several times, Alam made explicit connections between historical rulers and those from modern India. The modern day analogues to Aurangzeb were people also known as factional political leaders such as the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Atul Bihari Vajpayee, also a former Prime Minister and senior leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) political party. One evening, Alam gave his thoughts on the connections between Aurangzeb and Indira Gandhi, daughter of independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Prime Minister of India from 1966 until her assassination in 1984. He pointed out how Aurangzeb's cruel political and military actions have a modern comparison in the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. He pointed out that her declaration of martial law in India from 1975 to 1977 was just as harsh as the actions of a medieval Muslim ruler consistently stereotyped as a tyrant.⁴⁷ Actors using the space of rehearsal to discuss how medieval history

⁴⁶ A recent study of the late Mughal period re-evaluates these negative depictions of Aurangzeb. See Munis Faruqui, *Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504-1719* (University of Cambridge Press, 2012).

⁴⁷ During fieldwork, an episode in Delhi concerning the name of a major road re-confirmed the persistent, controversial, and historically questionable stereotype of Aurangzeb as a 'tyrant' who singularly targeted Hindus. To honor the memory of the former President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam after his death on July 27, 2015, several proposals were sent to the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) to rename a prominent road with Kalam's

relates to modern times is a unique part of the culture of Pierrot's Troupe. While in initial rehearsals the need to know the historical nature of one's role was consistently raised by the play's director, eventually several of the actors themselves engaged in their own research. They had thus internalized the emphasis on proper emotional acting and knowledge of history. One evening after a long day of rehearsals, one of the fellow actors in the Troupe offered to give me a ride home. As we discussed my research and the play, I asked him how he felt about *Sons of Babur* as an actor. "I really like my character, first of all. He is complex and I like the challenge of depicting a person who is very different from myself, as he is much older than I am now. He is also an interesting person in Indian history, so that is another reason." The character he was speaking about is none other than the infamous Aurangzeb. After I pressed him to be more specific, and tell me what he thought about the message of the play. "I have learned a lot from the play, a lot about history that I didn't know," he answered. He is not the only person part of the play who learned something new in the production process. In casual conversation in the rehearsal context it was often the case that actors would discuss historical events, dates, or other relevant details with each other. However, sometimes this display of knowledge seemed more of a bragging contest than just group sharing.

His remark that he learned "a lot" about a history that he didn't know is a key aspect of the production of *Sons of Babur*, a drama that revisits Mughal and Muslim history in order to make new claims about Indian Muslim belonging in the present. The experience of rehearsing for this play felt like one history lesson after another; we as a group were learning from the script, from the director Alam, and from each other. And Alam is very much aware of how his

name. Historians questioned the truth of claims that Aurangzeb was viciously 'anti-Hindu' that were used to justify removal of his name. Despite much public outcry, including a demand of explanation from the Delhi High Court, the road was officially renamed on September 4, 2015. I discuss this change and Aurangzeb's legacy later in this chapter.

play functions as a learning experience for his audiences. It is a common feedback he hears when people speak with him after every performance. It was also a remark that he made himself occasionally during rehearsals. Knowing the history of the play is essential, he reasoned, because they are “educating audiences” at each and every show.

Correlating India’s present with the Mughal pasts that are presented in the play requires a focus on history in the production process for *Sons of Babur*. According to Alam, making these connections is important because the historical process is one of both continuity and change. “Whatever we have seen and we have heard about history, is happening in the modern day also. It is a process of continuity and change. History has not ceased to exist. It is continuing.” His comments on the presence of the past in the present shows that producers of historical performance understand how drama serves to mediate how historical knowledge is produced. This discourse about historical accuracy reveals the relationship between two seemingly different forms of knowledge production: historiography and drama. The historical play is an important space where the past is revived, revisited, and re-imagined. In the creation and re-imagining of Indian history this play also participates in the dialogical construction of Indian history. The need that Alam and his actors feel to get that history “right” assumes that there are aspects of historiography that are correct and identified as such.

In drama however, some historical “facts” are more changeable than others. In his acknowledgements for the English text, Salman Khurshid closes with a caveat: “a word of caution about the poetic license I have taken for dramatic reasons: it is well intentioned and hopefully will not distract on grounds of historical inaccuracy.”⁴⁸ His concession that some

⁴⁸ Khurshid, *Sons of Babur*, xiii.

aspects of *Sons of Babur* may not be completely correct suggests that some aspects of history can be manipulated in service of a greater objective, while the effort as a whole remains “accurate.”

VII: Muslim Relationships to the Idea of Hindustān in *Sons of Babur*

Moments in rehearsals that became lessons in history show how Khurshid’s creative attempt to re-visit Mughal history intervenes in common understandings of Indian Muslim history. Not only did actors learn new aspects of the era they thought they knew; audiences also come away from performances of *Sons of Babur* with fresh perspectives on Mughal history and the contributions of Muslims to the idea of “*Hindustān*.” The term Hindustān has several overlapping meanings. The word is a combination of two Persian terms: “Hindu” and the suffix “*sthān*”, meaning abode or place.⁴⁹ “Hindu” in its earliest usage does not refer to a religious community. Rather, it describes a resident of a geographic area within North India, stretching from the Sutlej River in the Sindh region (today Pakistan) to Benares in present-day Uttar Pradesh.⁵⁰ In this geographic sense “*Hindustān*” means “place of the Hindus.” Less common is the use of this term to connote one who resides in North India who is also a follower of a particular religion, although Arvind Sharma identifies several examples wherein it has been used to describe one who is North Indian and Hindu.⁵¹ “*Hindustāni*” in its adjectival form is used to describe language, culture, and biological identity. Part of political debates in the early 20th century regarding what the national language of India should be, *Hindustāni* was developed as a national *lingua franca* that bridged Sanskritized Hindi and Persianized Urdu. Nationalist leaders

⁴⁹ Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*, s.v. “*Hindustān*,” 1236.

⁵⁰ Ibid. See also Wink, *Al-Hind*, Vol. 1: 125.

⁵¹ Arvind Sharma, “On Hindu, Hindustān, Hinduism and Hindutva”, *Numen* 49.1 (2002), pps. 1–36; 12-13.

such as Mahatma Gandhi and Munshi Premchand advocated for the institution of Hindustāni as the national language that would be written in Roman script.⁵² Also as an adjective Hindustāni connotes features of culture related to the geographic area of north India, as in “Hindustāni music.”

In terms of social identity “Hindustāni” is used in common parlance to describe a person with biological ties to the geographic area of Hindustān, irrespective of religious community. However, this identification comes to mean much more when used within a contemporary South Asian discourse that is fixated on matters of biology and belonging. The obsession with origins is employed to determine the social and cultural relationship between Muslims as a religious community and India as a national concept and cultural community. The construction of India as a Hindu nation means that Muslims, defined as a biological group, are outside of the national classification system. Hindustāni as a connotation of genetic heritage has come to define an identity category that either includes, or excludes, Indian Muslims.

In *Sons of Babur* the descriptor Hindustāni is used by Muslim rulers to contest how they are defined as “*Babur ki aulad*,” or foreigners living and ruling in North India. The play engages this conception by both establishing and questioning the Indian identity of the main Mughal rulers, from Babur to Bahadur Shah Zafar. The very first historical scene in the play features Babur as he debates with himself and his courtiers whether to remain in Hindustān or leave:

Courtier: Apologies for the insolence...but why do we not return to Kabul or Samarqand, oh Emperor?

Babur: Because in Hindustān battles are decisive, and there is only one chance for victory and defeat.

Second courtier: Refuge of the world, the better part of Hindustān has already been won.

Babur: And now we will rule.

⁵² I discuss Premchand’s essay on Hindustāni in Chapter one.

(After some more debate between the men)

Babur: Then after today no friend nor soldier should allow the thought of returning home to enter their mind. All agreed?

This excerpt from Alam's script, which follows Khurshid's text closely and with concision, begins to establish one of the main messages of *Sons of Babur*: that the Mughal rulers, slowly and over nearly two-hundred years, adopted the land they called Hindustān as their own. In these dialogues a tension builds through debate on returning to a land that is known, or remaining in a land that has proven to be a challenge thus far. Babur decisively announces that the newcomers are in fact staying, while also voicing his desire to be buried in Kabul when he dies.⁵³ The memoirs of the first Mughal ruler reveal no precise reason for Babur's desire to invade the subcontinent—a goal he achieved after the fifth attempt.⁵⁴ This scene creatively imagines details of that episode in history to emphasize that the choice to remain and rule in Hindustān was not a given, nor particularly easy, and yet was a clear choice by Babur.

⁵³ Babur died in 1530, in Agra (in today's Uttar Pradesh) and is entombed in Kabul, Afghanistan.

⁵⁴ See *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, translated, edited, and annotated by Wheeler M. Thackston (The Modern Library, New York, 2002).



Fig. 4.1 A scene from *Sons of Babur*: Babur surrounded by his courtiers (image courtesy of Pierrot's Troupe)

The choice to remain in Hindustān, and subsequently to make it their own through political rule and cultural influence, is what makes the Mughals different from other powers who came from outside to rule in the subcontinent (such as the British). Alam terms the difference as one between ‘adopting’ and ‘adapting’; the Mughals adapted themselves to the social conditions of Hindustān in order to make it their new homeland. “They (the Mughals) gradually became part and parcel of the life, culture, and crucial system of the country. In the process they also contributed and to an extent they influenced the social and cultural system of the country. They took many things from India, but they gave many things to India.” Thus it is important for the play’s ideological agenda to establish early the choice made by Babur to reject a return in favor of making a new homeland in Hindustān, the land for which he would later sacrifice his own life and to which he gave his son Humayun.

VIII: Talking Back to History: Muslim Belonging and Mughal Identity

Arguments that the Mughals adopted the land, people, and cultures of Hindustān provide the foundation for another clear message of *Sons of Babur*—that the Mughals did not simply

embrace Hindustān, but rather they literally are Hindustāni because of their ancestry. This message is conveyed in Alam's script more than once, but perhaps the argument is most emotional and clear in a key exchange between Rudra and Bahadur Shah Zafar in Act II, scene two. Sitting in Rangoon, the two have just witnessed a scene in which the Emperor Akbar debates the *jizya* tax with several court officials.⁵⁵ Raja Mansingh, a Hindu, argues in favor of ending the excise, and Mullah Do Piyaazah, a Muslim, contends that levying such a tax exempts Hindus from military service and also ensures their protection within the empire. After more debate, the scene ends with Akbar's bold pronouncement: "*Aaj se Hindu riyaaha se jaziya hamesha hamesha ke liye khatm kiya jaaye*" (From today, *jizya* will cease to be taken from the Hindu community, always and forever).

In the next scene, Rudra confesses to Bahadur Shah Zafar what worries him the most: whether or not the Mughals are Hindustāni. Rudra continues to explain that there are some people who call themselves Hindustāni and also maintain that the Mughals—and all of India's Muslims—are foreigners (*videshi*), that they are *Babur ki aulad*. Upon hearing this insult, Zafar is suddenly angry and launches into a heated and emotional defense of himself, and his ancestors, as belonging to their land and people:

Zafar: (*in anger*) Go! Tell the ill-mannered people of Hindustān that the Emperor whom they made as their ruler was very much himself from Hindustān... Bahadur Shah's mother was a Rajput, a Hindu, born a Hindu, remained a Hindu and died a Hindu... the Hindu blood in Bahadur Shah Zafar's veins is just as strong, just as present, as their blood. Go! Tell those people of Hindustān that the Mughal Emperor Jahangir was the son of a Hindu mother. Emperor Shah Jahan was the son of a Hindu mother. And listen! It is possible to doubt the paternity of Mughal princes, but not the identity of the mother. It is possible to doubt our Mughal identity, but not our identities as from Hindustān.

This dialogue gives voice to a fact about the parentage of Mughal princes that undercuts the stereotype of the Mughals as invaders, and from a foreign place. Many of the Mughal princes

⁵⁵ See the previous chapter for more on this tax and its role in how Muslim rulers are judged.

and Emperors were born by local women, many of those women being from what would later be identified as Hindu communities. This passionate rebuttal to the charge that the Mughals were foreigners relies on the biological facts of ancestry to prove the identity of the rulers as being born inside, and not outside, of Hindustān. That this argument is voiced by Bahadur Shah Zafar is important for the play's message. Zafar himself is a personification of the idea of Hindustān because of his biological identity and as the ruler chosen by the local, proto-nationalist army during the Mutiny in 1857. One viewer of the play pointed out how the connotation of the Mughals as foreign is found in the very grammar used to describe them: "we always talk about how the Mughals "*aaye they*" (had come) from somewhere outside. But they were born here." The verbal construction mention is the past perfect of the verb "*aana*," to come, in Hindi and Urdu. And with the exception of Babur, the point that Mughal rulers "were born here," in what is today modern India, is correct.

In performance, *Sons of Babur* ultimately sends a mixed message on how audiences (and readers) should judge Mughal rule. The presentation of Mughal history as both positive and negative is part of how the Troupe promotes the play. A line from the standard promotional material makes this aspect clear: "As the play progresses, one cannot but in turn be enamored by the benevolence of the Mughals, feel disgust at their ambition, become fearful of their cruelty and also admire their ability to unite diverse populations into an entity called Hindustān." This is something that many people who have seen the play remarked to me when I asked them for feedback on the performance. "I learned a lot about Mughal history, including plus points and minus points of the various Emperors" remarked one fan of the play. Alam agreed with my assessment that the play oscillates in how it represents several Mughal characters: "Yes, back and forth. They had many weaknesses and they had many strengths. Their weaknesses have also

been portrayed in the play. The way they fight for the throne, they were bloodthirsty people, they killed each other. It is not a black and white portrayal. It is not a theology on the Mughals. We are not only trying to praise the Mughals. We have also highlighted their weaknesses."

Greed, political ambition, and family discord are all examples of how *Sons of Babur* manages to depict the Mughals as sometimes good and sometimes not. Yet one interesting way that the Mughals are criticized happens through questions regarding their identities as Muslims. This is expressed through a critique of their political ambition when it overrides their ethical principles as Muslims. In one scene of Alam's play the character Sarah is reading out loud Rudra's reflections in his notebook. He writes about the premature death of Bairam Khan, an advisor to several early Mughal rulers who was assassinated while he was traveling to perform the Hajj. Her reflection on that political choice notes the common faith of Khan and his political enemies, and indicts the victory of political ambition over religious morality:

Did not these Mughal emperors, these practicing Muslims, these God fearing Kings, these *Zill-e Elahis*---the shadows of God on Earth---use the Hajj as a ploy to eliminate their opponents? They sent their near and dear ones to Hajj to see them absolved of sin. But, did not they sin themselves in doing so? And why did these Mughal *Badshahs* (kings) themselves not perform the Hajj, not even Aurangzeb?

The play simply assumes that the Mughal rulers identified themselves as part of a Muslim religious community, leaving aside questions of selfhood and the spectrum of pre-modern Islamic practices. Taking their Islamic affiliation for granted, the criticism of religious hypocrisy, of assassination of a Muslim while he was endeavoring to fulfill a religious obligation, is an appropriate one. A subtext to this scene is that the voice critical of the Mughals' religious ethics is also a Muslim one. This scrutiny of the Mughals as religious hypocrites was written by the adaptor and director of the staged play, Sayeed Alam, who is himself a practicing Muslim. Thus this critique becomes a matter of intra-Muslim commentary over medieval politics and piety.

Debates on what constitutes proper piety and practice for Muslims are both historical and contested. In the South Asian context, claims about correct Muslim behavior have long been part of the socio-political agenda of Muslim elites, especially in the context of colonial movements for revival and reform. Sayyid Ahmad Khan linked proper Muslim behavior to the community's progress; Muhammad Iqbal argued for the revival of a Muslim individuality linked organically to the concept of community as part of his nationalist commitments.⁵⁶ South Asian Muslim institutions such as the Deoband seminary, and Abul A'la Maududi's *Jammat-e Islami* organization, historically and at present promote a religious agenda and influence ideas on proper practice.⁵⁷ What makes the appearance of intra-Muslim critique in *Sons of Babur* different is that it is expressed in a fictionalized setting within an experience that is meant to educate but also entertain. The message about what constitutes correct Muslim practice is unconnected to the play's major themes about medieval history and Mughal belonging to Hindustān. However by raising this debate, Alam invites his audiences to also weigh in on the question of how "Muslim" the Mughals really were. Performance thus serves not only as a setting to mediate historiography; it is a representation that intervenes in debates on normative piety and practice.

Conclusion: Muslims Choosing India in India's Present

Sons of Babur is an example of performing and representing Muslim identities that is characterized by distinct processes and patterns, from the play's translation into a stageable script, to our preparation in rehearsals, to the social messages of the narrative and criticism of the play's ideological positions. Examples of performance in this study of Muslim India today brings

⁵⁶ Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, 119-126.

⁵⁷ See Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India* (2007), for more on the history and contributions of these organizations to Sunni Muslim practice.

attention to the scripted and the contested nature of representations of Muslim lives. *Sons of Babur* is a performance that invites reflection on the constructed nature of Indian history and the place of Indian Muslims in that narrative when it questions the representation of Muslim as foreign, and presents new information about Mughal history to allow its audience to re-evaluate the validity of the equation that to be Muslim is to not be Indian. There is no single Muslim voice in this play, as each figure in Mughal history is allowed to voice their individual relationships to Islam, and to the idea of Hindustān. There is no monolithic voice yet there is a singular test: to prove a Muslim fidelity to the Indian national idea.

Alam's opinion that his staged productions of *Sons of Babur* represent the Mughals as mixed—sometimes admirable and sometimes despicable—resembles a sentiment often heard from audiences of Darwesh's Tughlaq performance walks. Participants remark that this medieval Muslim ruler, like the Mughals, has good points and bad points. The inconsistent depiction of pre-modern Muslims in historical performance genres allows space for both statements about what constitutes Muslim selfhood, as well as challenges to that representation. Butler's discussion of the role of ambivalence in performance as a site of subversion suggests how the multiple ways in which being Muslim are signified in *Sons of Babur* reveal slippage and instability in the socio-religious and historical category of "Muslim." Due to the fluidity of this identity, it requires continuous signification in diverse social and cultural contexts, such as heritage tourism and staged historical drama in Delhi based on medieval Muslim histories. Subversion occurs on multiple levels, including disrupting how Muslims are defined in terms of Indian belonging and undermining the favorable depiction of Mughals with accusations of religious hypocrisy. The examples of how premodern Muslim histories are represented on the stage and at heritage monuments are ambivalent depictions of identity and send mixed messages

about social and cultural belonging.

Events of performing Muslim histories, like heritage walks based on the life of Muhammad bin Tughlaq and a staged drama that revives the experiences of Mughal rulers, have a key feature in common. These events are performances of Muslim elites and rulers that have been judged as foreign to Indian society and culture. Muslims who are evaluated in terms of their ethical actions regarding the mixed Hindu and Muslim population that they govern, and how their commitments to Islam influence their motivations and political rule. Performance allows these Muslims to, in a literal sense, return from the medieval past and interact with how they are known as written in history and understood by Indians today. They are given a voice to talk back to history and contest the illogical terms of belonging and the litmus test of loyalty to India that require Muslims to prove their fidelity to nation and society. Muslims enacting their national loyalties is a theme found in performances of Muslims in Bombay cinema. These films return to themes found throughout the performances in this study: Muslims choosing India, Muslims proving their loyalties to India, Muslims as the exotic “other,” and Muslim investments in the project of nation building.

Chapter Five

Representation in Bombay Cinema: Muslim Voices and Many Partitions in *Garm Hava (Hot Wind)*

*I am a true-blue Indian; no one can take that right from me...in a truly secular industry, such a performance of identity would be unnecessary.*¹

—Film actor and Indian Muslim Shahrukh Khan

*The persistence of the “Muslim ethos” in Indian cinema today is one of the most hopeful signs of Indian secularism.*²

—Film critic Iqbal Masud

Introduction: Partition’s New Logic

In the film *Garm Hava*, Salim Mirza and his family have been evicted from their home by the Custodian of Refugee Property, and he is desperately searching the city of his birth for a place that he, as a Muslim in post-Partition India, will be allowed to rent. He strolls down a narrow lane and hesitantly looks towards the door of what will be his next attempt when the following dialogues are heard:

You are looking for a place? What is your name?

Salim Mirza.

The issue is, you are too late. It has already been taken.

(a pause)

It has nothing to do with being Hindu or Muslim. It is just that I won’t rent to non-vegetarians.

You understand my predicament, right?

The film cuts to Salim as he enters the property that he hopes to make his family’s new home:

Salim: I have heard that you have a home that will be vacated soon?

Yes. Would you like to see it?

Salim: We’ll settle that later. First, please listen to me. I want it for myself, Salim Mirza. I am a Muslim. Can I still see it?

Of course, with pleasure. Listen Mr. Mirza, I am interested in the rent, not your religion.

Salim: Ever since I’ve been searching for a home I’ve longed to hear someone say that.

¹ Shekhar Gupta, “Talking with Shahrukh Khan,” *Indian Express*, 2003.

² Iqbal Masud, “The Muslim Ethos in Indian Cinema,” in *Screen* 4 March 2005. Accessed online on March 13, 2016. URL: http://www.screenindia.com/old/fullstory.php?content_id=9980.

If you'll pay a year's rent in advance, you can move in today.

Salim: A year in advance? That is unfair.

Yes, but one of your Muslim brothers fled to Pakistan owing seven months of rent.

Salim: Look, a year is too much. I can pay three months in advance.

Just as relevant today as it was forty years ago. This was the oft-noted refrain found in Indian media on the occasion of the limited release in late 2014 of a digitally restored and enhanced print of the 1973 film. Directed by M.S. Sathyu, *Garm Hava (Hot Wind)* is the first film in Bombay cinema to dramatize the north Indian Muslim experience of Partition. That a consensus formed on the film's continued pertinence for audiences forty years following its initial release suggests that the core themes of social and economic discrimination that define this Muslim condition in *Garm Hava* are still applicable to contemporary Indian society. Like Salim Mirza, a Muslim is just as unlikely to secure a rental contract in Delhi, or in "cosmopolitan" Mumbai, as they would have in the years after Partition.

Muslims have long been a part of the post-independence Bombay film industry, both in front of and behind the camera.³ In this cinema, Muslim representation is often framed by the question of their belonging in Indian social life. A typology of Muslim presentations in film includes the Muslim as historic nobility, as the exotic minority accessory, the militant Islamic terrorist, and the voice of ethical action in a post-9/11 context of the global "War on Terror." Part of an alternative trend in this cinema, *Garm Hava* represents an everyday Muslim experience of Partition, emphasizing the themes of social dislocation, discrimination, and economic exploitation. At the center of the film is the patriarch of the Mirza family—Salim Mirza—and the ways in which he and his relatives navigate the consequences of their choice to remain in India.

³ Instead of "Indian" or "Hindi," terming this field of production as "Bombay" cinema acknowledges that not all Indian films are also Hindi films, and emphasizes their connection to the urban space of Indian commercial capital where films are produced.

Garm Hava depicts the partitioning of the extended Mirza family along generational, gendered, and political lines. It reveals different Muslim positions on the choice to stay, and those change over the course of the film. *Garm Hava* contends that for many, leaving for Pakistan was related to economic opportunities which were withheld from Muslims after Partition. It presents Salim Mirza as the Muslim whose choice to remain in India is an act of faith and an ethical decision. Critics and audiences praise the film for its adherence to cinematic realism. Producers of the film maintain that it is an honest, realistic representation of a community much maligned by the new (ill)logics of Partition. While the film allows Muslims to voice their outrage at the injustices they face in Indian society, their cause is put into question in the film's final and penultimate scene. How the message that India's Muslims have a role in nation-building efforts is presented mutes the film's parallel agenda to convey Muslim indignation at their situation in the years following Partition.

I: *Garm Hava*: A Political Film that Continues to Resonate

Garm Hava was originally released in 1973. It is the first feature film made by M.S. Sathyu, who had prior experience working with director Chetan Anand on the celebrated war film *Haqueeqat* (Reality, 1964), and in television advertising and serials. The idea to produce a film on the plight of India's Muslims after Partition was suggested to one of the film's writers, Shama Zaidi, by the Urdu writer Rajinder Singh Bedi. Zaidi then approached the Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai for a story idea.⁴ Chughtai drafted several versions and Zaidi created a script which she showed to the Urdu lyricist and poet Kaifi Azmi. Azmi revised the script and developed the story based on his knowledge of the shoe-making trade in Agra. The story became one of a Muslim family of shoemakers who grapple with the option to leave India for Pakistan.

⁴ L.M. Joshi, ed., *South Asian Cinema: Partition Films*, Issue 5/6 (2004), 48.

Salim Mirza and his family are conservative, middle class Muslims living in Agra, Uttar Pradesh. Partition and the creation of India and Pakistan feel only a few months old, and some of Salim's relatives have already left their homes for the new Muslim "homeland." Over the course of the film, Salim and his family grapple with the choice to leave India in different ways and in shifting perspectives. The choice to leave for Pakistan is just as much of a choice to stay in India, and the film dramatizes the social, political, economic, and gendered obstacles that many North Indian Muslims faced in the wake of two new nations premised on separate needs for separate communities. *Garm Hava*'s message for Indian society completely rejects the logic of inherent separatism in favor of a radical progressive unity. M.S. Sathyu said that it was both the theme of the script along with its revolutionary message that drew him to want to produce it as a film:

It was the very first film dealing in some way with the partition of the country. For twenty-five years after Partition, nobody had attempted to make a film anywhere near that. And this happened to be a family who is from Agra, which was slowly and slowly—members of the family were moving out of India. The kind of tragedies they faced, and the suspicions they—you know—it was basically a highly sentimental story but it had a political leaning.⁵

The film was funded in part by the Film Finance Corporation (FFC). The FFC was established in 1951 following recommendations of the Film Enquiry Committee and was charged with helping to finance, produce, and distribute low-budget films determined to be "artistic."⁶ *Garm Hava* was the second script that director M.S. Sathyu submitted to the FFC for funding. They covered about twenty-five percent of the production costs; the remaining monies were provided by friends of Sathyu.⁷ The film's actors worked for next to nothing; Balraj Sahni, in the lead role, received a salary of five thousand Indian Rupees and most of the other actors were paid only a few hundred.

⁵ Interview with the author, December 24, 2014.

⁶ Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood* (London: Routledge, 2004), 49.

⁷ Interview with the author, December 24, 2014.

Sahni, at that time a prolific actor in Bombay cinema, was accustomed to receiving a salary that went into the hundred thousands (at least one *lakh* in INR) for his work on a film. The entire film was shot without sound, because the crew could not afford sound recording equipment. Sound was dubbed in post-production at a studio in Bombay.

Participation in *Garm Hava* was about more than acting and earning; it was part of a larger effort to affect social change through the arts and culture. Nearly all of the production team—actors, script writers, and stage hands—were involved in the Indian People's Theatre Association, or IPTA. The organization was formed in 1942 in Bombay to encourage use of the cultural arts to support activist and political goals. Its members were active in the anti-colonial movement. M.S. Sathyu described the connection between IPTA and the film as a project of purpose: “IPTA was part of a theatre movement in India. We were all leftists who worked together on stage doing meaningful kind of theatre. This film happened in the same way. Only members of the theatre group from Bombay, Agra, and Delhi gathered together to make the film.”⁸

Garm Hava was shot over nearly forty-five days in different locations in and around Agra, Uttar Pradesh. Agra was the first of several capitals of the Mughal Empire. It is the site of several historical monuments built during Mughal rule: Agra Fort, Fatehpur Sikri (a palace built by Akbar), the tomb of Akbar, and the famous Taj Mahal. Several scenes in *Garm Hava* were filmed inside and around the Taj Mahal and Fatehpur Sikri, done covertly because permissions from the Archeological Survey of India were costly and difficult to arrange.⁹ Sathyu told me that the crew rehearsed on a Saturday, and “on Sunday we went like picnickers with our bags and

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

with all the parts of the camera. We assembled it in the garden. We rehearsed and shot the entire thing with a handheld camera, because we couldn't take it in a tripod." Stealthy shooting was only one unconventional aspect of the film's production. At times during the duration of filming in Agra, locals interested in watching what was going on stalked the crew. It often happened that one of these spectators would give unsolicited advice to the production team, creating somewhat of a disturbance. Sathyu describes how they tried to get rid of the local nuisance:

It was very difficult to shoot in U.P. (*laughs*). They misbehave. They will come and stand in front of the camera—it was very difficult to get rid of them. So we would send them on a wild goose chase by sending a mock troupe for the shooting. And they would go in a tonga (a horse-drawn wooden vehicle), and all these students would follow the tonga. Many times the occupants of the tonga were wearing burqas. They all got down from the tonga, and they would remove their burqas, and they were all men!

As it highlights Mughal-era monuments as backdrops in several scenes, the film is a showcase of the heritage and the Muslim legacy of Agra as much as it is a story about the Mirza family.

Once completed, *Garm Hava* became imbricated in controversy related to the political climate of Uttar Pradesh at the time of its intended release. After its review of the film, the Censor Board refused to award it an official certificate and pushed for the film to be banned. A different review committee was organized and gave the film positive reviews, yet a certificate continued to be elusive.¹⁰ Bal Thackery, leader of the Shiv Sena (a Hindu nationalist organization based in the state of Maharashtra) demanded that Sathyu organize a personal screening for him prior to its release; the Sena threatened to burn the screens of any movie hall that showed the film if this demand was not acceded to.¹¹ As he personally knew then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Sathyu used this connection to lobby Mrs. Gandhi and her Minister of Information and Broadcasting himself. After screening *Garm Hava* for them, both praised the film and gave their

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "M.S. Sathyu and Shama Zaidi in Conversation with Teesta Setalvad," YouTube, accessed March 30th, 2016. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEGhKn4LhzA>.

support for its release. That would be delayed, however, due to concerns that the film's political content would exacerbate communal tensions at a sensitive time. Midterm elections were coming up in Uttar Pradesh, the largest Indian state and also home to a majority of India's Muslim population. Fearing that an immediate release of the film there would cause social unrest, they postponed the film's release for several months. The film was then first screened in several cities in the South and later released in Delhi and Bombay. The process of obtaining the necessary permissions took nearly eleven months.

Garm Hava has received, and continues to acquire, national and international acclaim. Ironically, the film which was thought to encourage communal sentiments was given the National Award for promoting social integration in 1974. At the Indian Filmfare Awards in 1975, Ismat Chughtai and Kaifi Azmi won the in the category Best Story, Shama Zaidi and Kaifi Azmi won in Best Screenplay, and Kaifi Azmi won a third award for Best Dialogue Writer. The film was nominated for the Palm d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1974, and at the time of writing, is again up for contention at the 2016 Cannes Festival. At Cannes in 1974 the film was spotted by representatives from the Oscars, who invited the film to participate in the Best Foreign Film category that year.

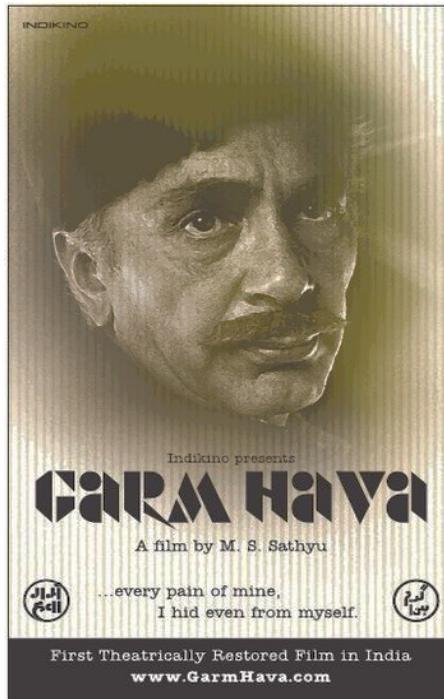


Fig. 5.1 The official poster of the 2014 re-release of *Garm Hava*

Garm Hava was digitally restored in a joint effort between Sathyu and associates in Bombay and Los Angeles and re-released in a few Indian cities in November 2014. A fresh wave of reviews came to the same conclusion as critics had in 1973: the film is worth seeing again and again because it remains so relevant to the social climate in India today. This claim of relevancy was affirmed by many interviews that Sathyu and Shama Zaidi gave on the occasion of the 2014 release, as in this excerpt from Sathyu's comments to The Hindu's Anuj Kumar:

Sathyu agrees that the politicians and a section of the media would like to make us believe that the world has moved on and that the wounds of Partition have healed but the Muslims in India still face the same problems. They still face scorn when they go out to rent an accommodation in a Hindu majority area and their business interests are still under suspicion.¹²

Another reason offered for why the film remains pertinent to Indian society forty years after it was produced is because *Garm Hava* is said to realistically depict the situation and experiences

¹² Anuj Kumar, "Back With the Wind," The Hindu, November 13th 2014. Accessed online. URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/garm-hava-digital-restoration-interview-with-ms-sathyu/article6594739.ece>.

of the Muslims dealing with the consequences of Partition. This claim is related to associations shared by the film's producers and viewers, as much as it is a feature of the film's qualities and presentation.

II: Realism in Bombay Cinema and Muslim Representation

Garm Hava is consistently lauded by both professional critics and general audiences for being a “realist” film. The producers of the film also emphasize that it is a realistic representation of a middle-class, conservative Muslim family. Director M.S. Sathyu put his debut film in context with how other films part of Bombay cinema depict Muslims:

Traditionally we have had these so-called Muslim socials...in these films, the focus was either on a Muslim woman, who was a *tawaif* (courtesan) or a Muslim man who was a nawab attached to a degenerate lifestyle and that was all that was Muslim. Or in a popular film there would be some very comic character that is like a buffoon. Minorities like a Christian or a Muslim were always made to do such roles. *But nobody had ever thought of presenting the Indian Muslim as a part of our society in a very realistic way.* And *Garm Hava* really did that. That was its strong point. The characters of my film are like any other people. They're not comic, they're not exaggerated. *They're real* (emphasis added).¹³

Praise for *Garm Hava* due to its realistic characterization of Muslims suggests that both producers and audiences share similar expectations about Muslim attitudes and social life which the film confirms. What lies behind the impression of a Muslim reality in the film should not be misunderstood as objectivity in how it depicts its subject. As Said theorized in *Orientalism*, the ideological nature of representation must be scrutinized for what it purports to convey. The content of Muslim representation in *Garm Hava* needs to be compared to the discourses that define the film as authentic, as real, and as reflecting a Muslim “experience” of Partition.

In the study of film, realism is used conceptually to describe a particular style of production which aims to reproduce the perception of objective reality. Locations, costume, and

¹³ Joshi, *South Asian Cinema*, 64-5.

dialogues are developed according to what is deemed authentic. However, theorists of realism in cinema emphasize the subjective experience of film spectatorship as rationale for how it creates the impression of reality. Christian Metz argues that what viewers perceive as real is in actuality a subconscious response and desire to identify with what has been constructed for them. He emphasizes the importance of motion and the human body to creating the sense of realism: “the movie spectator is absorbed, not by a ‘has been there,’ but by a sense of ‘there it is.’”¹⁴ The producers of *Garm Hava* endeavored to construct a realistic Muslim subject in order to cultivate sympathy with the Indian Muslim experience of Partition. According to the logic of realism in film theory, audiences will develop feelings of affinity with the minority’s plight as a result of its authentic representation.

In assessing the nature of realism in film, theorists point to the position of the viewer in relation to their visual subject to describe an ideology of the viewers’ gaze. What emerges from this perspective is the fact that the viewer is implicated in the exploitation of characters on screen simply due to the act of watching. In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey discusses how cinema engages fundamental psychological processes associated with the gendered nature of narrative and point of view.¹⁵ Metz points out the identification processes operating in the act of spectatorship; Mulvey goes further to expose the unconscious gendered and patriarchal structure of film form, and argues that narcissistic identification is a key consequence of that arrangement. That affinity centers on a male protagonist defined by his voyeuristic capacity to look, or gaze, while female characters are defined by their ability to

¹⁴ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, Michael Taylor trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 6.

¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16:3 (1975), pps. 6-18; 9.

attract that male gaze. While Mulvey has been faulted for the rigidity of her binaries (male/female and active/passive), her work identifies how the viewer participates in the exploitation of what they are seeing onscreen. Film spectatorship is not a completely objective, non-ideological activity. In *Garm Hava*, several scenes deliberately employ the viewer's gaze using cinematographic strategies. This gaze functions ideologically when Muslim characters are positioned to directly ask the viewer for assistance.

Metz adds the qualification that realism does not stand in for reality; whether the onscreen events are logical or are not, the viewer is aware that they are in a situation where they are being presented with a narrative. "No one expects to meet in the street the hero of some scrupulously realistic contemporary novel. Realism affects the organization of the contents, not narration as a status."¹⁶ Metz's assertion here is a structuralist argument: the structure is fundamentally unreal, therefore the content—no matter how real it might seem—is known at some level as not real. Even if the filmic experience is not "reality," it has influence in society outside of its context. Stuart Hall's discussion of how producers encode messages, which in turn are decoded by audiences, points to how the ideas which films convey about experience can influence social life.¹⁷ It is in the act of decoding that the messages of the film become part of the "off-screen" realities of spectators.

Hall identifies several scenarios operating in the processes of coding and encoding that rest on how the associations (or disassociations) between producers and viewers influence how the messages of film are understood.¹⁸ In a scenario that fits Hall's concept of a dominant-

¹⁶ Metz, *Film Language*, 21-22.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding," in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Love, and Paul Willis, eds., *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pps. 128-38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 130-33.

hegemonic code, the consumer directly interprets the actual message, and decodes it exactly the way it was encoded. Here the connotations of a message are understood in the way that senders intended (encoded). This is possible because, as Hall argues, the consumer is positioned within a dominant point of view and therefore shares codes with producers. Shared assumptions are what lead to viewers reproducing the intended meanings of codes; they share the same cultural biases of the producers of the social messages of film.

When reviewers of *Garm Hava* praise the film for its realism, this suggests that they are operating within the same dominant code as the film's producers. This association is relevant for evaluating claims that the film presents a realistic portrait of the Muslim predicament. Shama Zaidi says that the film is a real look at the Muslim middle-class: “the characters are from ordinary life so everyone who watches the film, feels it tells the story of their family. It does not focus on the rich, but on middle class people.”¹⁹ The congruence between how producers and consumers describe *Garm Hava* indicates that the dominant (and mainly non-Muslim) establishment presents the Muslim in a particular way that audiences expect—violated yet resilient, maligned yet ready to join the national masses. As Hall's work emphasizes, this typology of representation is tied to particular class interests and serves ideological needs. The producers of the film, members of social activist groups working in the arts and culture, represent Muslim experiences of social and economic discrimination and make claims about how they belong in the national discourse of progress, and in building the new Indian nation. These ideological messages are put into question by content of the last scene of the film.

¹⁹ Joshi, *South Asian Cinema*, 49.

III: Trends in Muslim Representation in Bombay Cinema

The Bombay film industry is lauded as a rare institution in Indian social and cultural life because it supposedly remains untainted by the politics and divisiveness of sectarianism.²⁰ Yet comments from Indian Muslims who are a part of that industry, like Shahrukh Khan's statement at the beginning of this chapter, suggest that this praise is not entirely deserved. Studies of Indian film have pointed out the long and continuing association between Muslims and Bombay cinema, not just in film production but also in terms of Muslim characters and histories on celluloid.²¹ Yet, Muslim influence extends beyond those obvious spheres. Utilizing Marshall Hodgson's concept of the "Islamicate" for the Indian film context, Mukul Kesavan argues that the relationship between Hindi cinema and Islamicate culture is a field that is more than Muslim characters or films about Muslim history and social life. Kesavan claims that this culture has "been instrumental in shaping Hindi cinema as a whole—not just some "Muslim" component of it."²²

Many analyses of Muslim representation in post-independence commercial Indian cinema trace a historical arc from the courtly character of the early Muslim socials, to contemporary films that feature the Muslim gangster, and more recently, films that script the Muslim as a terrorist. In this literature, scholars emphasize the ways in which Muslims are consistently represented as one-dimensional, and have their identities flattened; they become

²⁰ Kalyani Chadha and Anandam P. Kavoori, "Exoticized, Marginalized, Demonized: The Muslim "Other" in Indian Cinema," in Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar, eds., *Global Bollywood* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), pps. 131-145; 132.

²¹ See Kaushik Bhaumik, "The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913-36" (Unpublished Dissertation. Oxford University, 2001) for more on Muslim participation in the establishment of the Bombay film industry.

²² Mukul Kesavan, "Urdu, Awadh, and the Tawaif: The Islamicate Roots of Hindi Cinema," in Zoya Hasan, ed., *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities, and the State* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1994), pps. 244–257; 255.

what Rachel Dwyer describes as “an Other among others.”²³ Much less discussed is how the filmic representation of Muslims constructs a subject that suggests ideological interests and is part of discursive social contexts. How the Muslim is constructed in Bombay cinema is set within diverse discourses that bring multiple meanings to narrative content. Muslims are represented through a stock set of tropes, symbols, and narratives that are employed to first air, then resolve, contemporary social tensions. Resolution in film narrative is symbolic of national unity. The need to resolve tension in ways that preserves the fictional unity of the nation undermines any critical presentation of how Muslims relate to the Indian state and society, such as *Garm Hava*.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the everyday experience of Muslims was the subject of a number of films, some of them very successful. These films are described as part of a genre of Muslim “socials” because their narratives take up Muslim everyday social life, often restricting themselves to that narrow subject so much that it is rare to find a non-Muslim character in the story. Muslim space is often set in Lucknow, and is associated with a period of high cultural and literary production that while not exclusively Muslim, has come to stand in for a cultured, upper-class Muslim past. Mohammad Sadiq’s *Chaudvein ka Chand* (*Moon of the Fourteenth Day*, 1960) is a comedic melodrama about the romantic fumblings of a nawab, or a Muslim aristocrat. The practice of purdah, or veiling, for Muslim women is a key plot device that sets up obstacles to flirtation and romance; a fleeting glimpse from behind a woman’s veiled face inspires a competition between male friends to win her affection. The Muslims in these films are depicted as aristocratic and in contexts of leisure; the storylines are infused with elaborate Urdu poetry (*shai’ri*) and dialogues evoke formal etiquettes (*adab*) and high culture (*tehzeeb*).

²³ Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2006).

What is striking in the classification of films about aristocratic and upper-class Muslims as routine social life is that these characters and their lives do not reflect the experiences of “everyday” Indian Muslims.²⁴ Other films, including *Garm Hava*, move away from Muslim nobility to instead represent Muslims dealing with more common social experiences of violence, economic exploitation, and social discrimination. Like *Garm Hava*, many of these films represent Muslim experiences of Partition. Designated as the “New Wave Muslim Social,” these films emphasize cinematic realism in opposition to commercial and entertainment film, to instead focus on social issues often ignored in Bombay cinema.²⁵ Shyam Benegal’s trilogy of films—*Mammo* (1994), *Sardari Begum* (1996), and *Zubeidaa* (2001) take up such themes in urban Indian contexts. Benegal’s female Muslim characters fight against the injustices done to them by the patriarchy of the state and their families. In *Mammo*, the Muslim heroine Mammo chastises the drunkard and abusive husband of her sister’s maid for his shameful behavior. She is also a voice that challenges the logic of borders and identities, faking her own death so that she can avoid deportation to Pakistan and remain in India with extended family. Sardari in *Sardari Begum* reacts to the social indignity associated with female musical performers by focusing on her training and performance, refusing to accede to negative stereotypes about the profession. The complexity that Benegal and his writers (including Shama Zaidi) bring to Muslim female experiences offers a nuanced representation of Muslim feminist responses to their positions in relation to their families and the nation-state. While they are all late twentieth-century releases,

²⁴ Ravi Vasudevan draws attention to several pre-independence films in the social genre, with Muslim producers that represent Muslims as a community newly emerging as part of a modernizing Indian national project. They often combine “traditional” signs of Muslimness: the courtesan, the aristocratic household, and the Muslim *mohalla* (neighborhood) along with signifiers of “modernity”: Muslims in secular professions such as doctors and lawyers. See Vasudevan, “Film Genres, the Muslim Social, and Discourses of Identity: 1935-1945,” *BioScope* 6(3), 2015, pps. 27-43.

²⁵ Richard Allen and Ira Bhaskar, *The Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009), 91.

their storylines remain set in Muslim pasts—in the 1950s and 1960s (*Sardari Begum*), and the years around independence (*Zubeidaa and Mammo*).

Other films produced at nearly the same time as those in the early Muslim social genre depict episodes from Mughal (read as Muslim) history. In these “Muslim historicals” such as *Mughal-e Azam* (The Great Mughal, K. Asif, 1960), *Jahan Ara* (Vinod Kumar, 1964), and *Pukar* (Call, Sohrab Modi, 1939), the great rulers of the Mughal Empire are depicted with high melodrama using elaborate sets of the royal court, and with a register of Urdu that is heavy with Persian vocabulary. Spectacle and opulence are devices used to conjure an imagined magisterial Muslim past. As is the case with drama and theatre, depictions of the Mughals in film emphasize their respect for Hindu society and traditions. *Mughal-e Azam*, a film produced nearly ten years after Partition, wants to convey the emperor Akbar as the secular uniter of a diverse empire. In their analysis of the Islamicate nature of Bombay cinema, Allen and Bhaskar hypothesize on the ideological functions of Muslim and Mughal history by connecting themes in these films to their context both preceding and following independence:

In the context of the anti-colonial struggle and the intensely fractious communal situation in the country, the affirmation of the Mughals performed a dual ideological function, both equally critical. The ‘great Mughals’—Akbar, Jahangir and Shahjehan—became a symbolic location of ethical and moral values, military and political power, and justice, as well as of a high level of cultural, social and artistic development. The celebration of these achievements asserted the ability of colonized India for self-governance. While this anti-colonial gesture was extremely significant, the Muslim Historicals were equally important in the way they affirmed the value of Muslim rule and culture against the majoritarian Hindu political mobilization of the time.²⁶

While they may convey the worth of Muslim rule and culture to contemporary audiences, these films do so in a manner that at the same time distances and exoticizes Muslims. Chadha and Kavoori point out how representations of Muslims in the films of this genre served to render

²⁶ Ibid., 6.

Muslims and their histories as just that—history: “by representing Muslims only as members of the ruling class who generally spoke, dressed, and behaved differently from the norm, they rendered them a group distinct and separate from the mainstream.”²⁷ The ideological message of these representations is that the Muslim as India’s strange and separate other is the Muslim who belongs within the national framework. That rendering as distinct and separate undermines any positive appraisal of Mughal and Muslim history, because it fails to integrate those histories into a mainstream discourse related to Indian culture and social life.

A shift starting in the 1970s saw Muslim roles relegated to secondary characters. They often functioned as the exotic sidekick to protagonist heroes generally marked as Hindu. The veteran actor Pran’s role as Sher Khan in the 1973 hit *Zanjeer* (*Chains*, Prakash Mehra) assisted the hero Vijay as he fought Bombay underworld crime. Sher Khan is, as his name suggests, a Pathan Muslim who eschews wine and gambling (although he himself runs a gaming parlor). While his assistance is vital to Vijay at crucial moments in the film, Sher Khan’s clownish visual presentation—an attire of bright and ostentatious clothing—undermines his stature. This stereotype is found in other films produced around the same time as *Zanjeer*. Rishi Kapoor’s Muslim character Akbar in the hit film *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* (Manmohan Desai, 1977) is a Sufi *qawwali* singer vying for the affections of a young doctor. He has a penchant for hijinks as well as flashy and bright clothing that set him very much apart from the somber hero of the film, Amar (see Fig. 2). Profoundly stereotypical, Muslim representations in these films construct characters with flamboyance, exaggeration, and superficiality.²⁸

²⁷ Chadha and Kavoori, “Exoticized, Marginalized, Demonized,” 136.

²⁸ An important exception in this trend is *Coolie* (*Porter*, Manmohan Desai and Prayag Raj, 1983), whose Muslim protagonist expresses pride in his Muslim identity in dialogues, dress, and in actions. Played by the superstar Amitabh Bachchan, Iqbal is a porter, or “coolie” at a Bombay rail station. He leads a worker’s movement to secure more rights for the porters and stands in for a voice against exploitation and industrialization. Signifiers of his Muslimness include his work badge (number 786, the numerical code for Allah) and his sidekick pet falcon Allah-

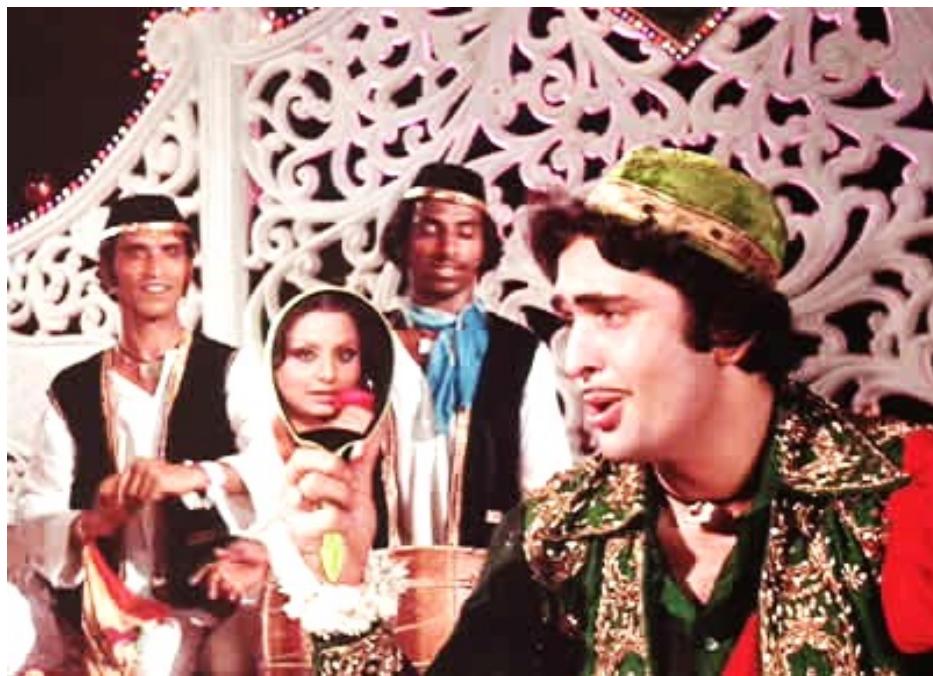


Fig. 5.2 From the film *Amar, Akbar, Antony*: Akbar holds a mirror to view his beloved in a *qawwali* scene

Indian Muslims as terrorists, criminals, and corrupt police officers define a genre of films beginning in the late 1990s into the 2000s. At this time, tensions between India and Pakistan were at their highest in decades, erupting in the Kargil conflict in 1999. Acts of terrorism on Indian soil were becoming more and more frequent. Mani Ratnam's films *Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1995) are recognized as turning points in how Bombay cinema represents Muslims and their relationships to violence, both local and state-sponsored. While *Roja* explores the situation of militancy in Kashmir, *Bombay* takes up the 1992-93 riots in Bombay that were a consequence of the December 1992 violence and destruction of the Babri Masjid. A major difference in the Muslim representations of these films is that Islam as a religious identity is conflated with the criminal and violent actions of Muslim characters. The opening scene of *Roja* quickly makes the association clear for the viewer; police officers are chasing an unknown subject in a dark and

rakha. In a dramatic scene Iqbal faces his nemesis Zafar inside a Sufi *dargah* (shrine). The green shroud covering the saint's tomb flies onto Iqbal's face, thus conveying the protection of Allah as Iqbal prepares to fight.

dense forest (later revealed as the Muslim terrorist Wasim Khan). Immediately following this scene the Muslim call to prayer (*azan*) is heard. Rachel Dwyer's analysis of this genre puts their representation in context with established approaches in Indian film: "Islam is not seen as a problem in Indian cinema providing that it (Islam) is within the Islamicate context rather than the world of politicized or globalized Islam."²⁹

In many of these films, the violent Muslim is external to the Indian state—they are Pakistani, as is the case in *Sarfarosh* (*Fervor*, John Matthews Matthan, 1998), or they may be Afghan, as is Hilal in *Mission Kashmir* (Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2000). The films do not entirely externalize this threat, however; Hilal's operative is an Indian-born Kashmiri named Altaaf. Conceptualizing the threat of Islamic violence as a product outside of Indian borders is related to how films aspire to represent the nation as a protective, secular force. Amit Rai describes these films as part of a "cinepatriotic" turn in Hindi cinema which depicts social difference as crucial to the Indian state's stability. This is a message about the essential need for a national unity that supersedes social difference. There is a limit to this diversity however, as the fate of militant Muslim characters in these films suggest a difference that is ultimately intolerable.³⁰

An overlooked aspect of films within this genre are "good" Muslim characters. They see no contradiction in their loyalties to Islam and to India, and they speak against assumptions that question these commitments. Good Muslims are often cast as police officers, and the requirement of their position to uphold the laws of the state means that they literally enact their national loyalties on screen. *Sarfarosh*'s main Muslim character, Inspector Salim, works for the Bombay Special Police force and is assigned to break up the smuggling operations of Sultan. He is kicked

²⁹ Dwyer, *Filming the Gods*, 130.

³⁰ Amit Rai, "Patriotism and the Muslim Citizen in Hindi Films." *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 7:3 (2003), pps. 4-15; 9.

off the case when he fails to capture the criminal; his supervisors assume that he let Sultan go because they are both Muslims. Salim confronts his colleagues and challenges their conclusion by claiming that India is his country too.

In *Mission Kashmir*, the Muslim Inayat Khan is head of a special police force assigned to battle militants in Kashmir. Khan's loyalties to his country are questioned when the Prime Minister is scheduled to arrive; as a Kashmiri Muslim, will he fulfill his duty to protect the politician? His answer echoes Salim's contention that Muslims should not be constantly required to prove their loyalties:

Deshpande: Look Khan *saab* (sir), one Indian PM was killed by her own security people in the name of religion.

Khan: Mr. Deshpande, it is not the misfortune of Muslims only.... but of the entire country that a soldier who has braved bullets for twenty-one years must prove his loyalty repeatedly, because his name is not Deshpande but Inayat Khan. My blood is in this Kashmiri soil. My nine-year old son is buried in it. My love for this country needs no certificates from a bureaucrat.³¹

Good Muslims as characters that are in positions of having to serve the state argue that Muslims can be loyal Indian citizens, despite other suspicion of what their faith requires of them. When the national loyalty of good Muslim representatives is called into question, these films argue that including trustworthy Muslims is of critical importance to the Indian state's security needs. They suggest that it is the Indian nation who ultimately loses when loyal Muslims are denied the opportunity to serve their country.

A recent series of films that feature Muslim characters remains focused on Muslim relationships to violence, but this is newly placed in a global context. Many of these films are geographically set outside of India—such as *New York*, *Kurbaan*, and *My Name is Khan*—and depict Indian Muslims living and working in a post-9/11 America. They address new topics for

³¹ *Mission Kashmir*, directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2000.

Bombay cinema, in particular Indian Muslim social life and matters of belonging in the American context. They share a central theme in that they each index the relationships that these Muslims have to acts of domestic terrorist violence. In these scenes, Muslims debate each other and other characters about belonging and justice; Muslims give voice to and engage with currently circulating discourses on Islam, terrorism, and social discrimination.

Kurbaan (Sacrifice, Rensil D'Silva, 2009) explores contemporary Indian Muslim experiences in suburban America.³² Muslim characters include both “good” and “bad” types: Ehsan is a professor of Islamic studies by day and at night, part of a local Indian Muslim terrorist group. Riyaz befriends Ehsan in order to infiltrate the terrorist group and thwart their plans. In the film, a discussion between Muslim characters reveals different assumptions of how they belong in American society as Muslims. Riyaz, a journalist when he isn’t training to be a terrorist, has returned home to New York following an assignment in Iraq. He meets his girlfriend and grandfather, Abu Jaan, in a restaurant and the conversation quickly turns into a disagreement. Abu Jaan suggests that Riyaz use his reporting to raise “our” issues, by which he means Muslim concerns. When Riyaz explains that he does cover those issues, Abu Jaan retorts that he is talking about the Muslim voice, not an American voice. Riyaz reacts in strict words and says (in English) “Abu Jaan, we are Americans.” After a pause, Abu Jaan replies, “No, we are Muslims first. Not Americans.” He continues to accuse Riyaz of ignoring the destruction and injury done to Muslims when reporting on events in the war zone, and implies that Riyaz is a traitor to their faith community. Riyaz responds that it is precisely because of fundamentalist attitudes such as this that the reputation of all Muslims is under suspicion. In reply Abu Jaan asks, “Since when did loyalty to one’s faith become a fundamentalist attitude?” The scene

³² *Kurbaan*, directed by Rensil D'Silva, Dharma Productions, 2009.

abruptly ends there, when Riyaz's girlfriend suggests that they decide on what they will order.

This dialogue raises an important issue about how Muslim communities relate to an American state that is also leading military actions in majority Muslim populations in the Middle East. Does participation in American social life imply tacit approval of American military violence done against Muslims around the world? How should Muslims respond to negative discrimination in America? The actions taken by Muslims in the film offer different solutions: Ehsan chooses to participate in a terrorist plot, and Riyaz is working to prevent that from fruition. The symbolism of Riyaz as the sole Muslim survivor at the end of *Kurbaan* clearly indicates an ideological message that violence and antagonism ultimately will not serve Muslim interests in social justice.

Karan Johar's film *My Name is Khan* (2010) takes a different approach in depicting Muslim responses to discrimination in America.³³ Rizwan, an Indian Muslim with Asperger's, suffers the accidental death of his step-son after the child is bullied at school for being the son of a Muslim. The tragedy compels him to embark on a journey across the United States to tell everyone, and eventually the President, that he is a Muslim and also not a terrorist. In the course of his journey, he is consistently confronted with social inequalities, and his character continues to remind the viewer, literally and symbolically, of the American commitment to social justice. For example, Rizwan is ironically detained for suspicion of being involved with terrorism at the very time when he is reminding Americans that not all Muslims are terrorists. His enunciation of these ideals is not just emblematic, however. Rizwan literally intervenes in a calamitous situation when the home of Mama Jenny, a woman living in Georgia who took him in during his travels, is threatened by a Hurricane Katrina-esque disaster. He succeeds in directing media attention and in

³³ *My Name is Khan*, directed by Karan Johar, 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2010.

organizing Muslim volunteers to assist in Mama Jenny's plight. Rizwan, like other Muslim characters in these films, has suffered a loss intimately related to his negatively defined religious identity. Yet unlike characters in *Kurbaan* and *New York*, this Muslim chooses to retaliate not by violence but instead by education and enacting the ideals of social justice. The choice of these films to emphasize Muslims in debate and dialogue is important because it complicates, rather than flattens, the presentation of Muslim identities.

Responding to a question to compare the two films, Karan Johar sets up *My Name is Khan* as the hopeful antidote to *Kurbaan*'s grim assessment of the issues: “*Kurbaan* didn't have ‘hope,’ whereas *My Name is Khan* had hope...*Kurbaan* was very cinematic and interesting in its approach but it didn't offer a solution. Rather it just tells the problem. *My Name is Khan* offers you that solution.”³⁴ Indeed if we are to take Johar's comments literally then the ideological solution that the film offers is one that encourages Muslims to work within the rhetorical space offered by evocations of the American Dream, and to remind the agents of discrimination that they are on the wrong side of social justice. This is notable in terms of how Bombay cinema has represented Muslims, because it tasks them with a serious critique of American social life. These films also depart from that cinema's usual construction of Muslims as an anxiety for merely the Indian nation.

Bombay cinema has constructed a social category of the Indian Muslim defined as the exotic aristocrat, the marginal minority, as a source of a violence rooted in Islam, and as a critique of American social life. The literal figure and experiences of Muslim characters have and continue to serve as a location for diverse ideological agendas, such as nostalgia in Muslim socials, and statements about how religious faith relates to violent acts done by Muslims in more

³⁴ “Interview with Karan Johar,” URL: <http://entertainment.oneindia.in/bollywood/features/2010/karan-johar-interview-180210.html>. Accessed October 10, 2013.

recent films. Yet it is striking that Bombay cinema does not tend to construct the Muslim in a positive way that is also set within a contemporary narrative context. Trends in these films suggest that the only good Muslim has to be a historical Muslim. This is a tendency found in other aspects of national cultural production, such as the theatre and in the Indian heritage industry.

IV: Representation of the Many Partitions in *Garm Hava*

Garm Hava opens with documentary-like images of the dislocation and violence of Partition. One after another, the film presents black and white photographs of the figures of Indian nationalism and of Partition: Nehru, Jinnah, Maulana Azad, Lord Mountbatten and his wife. Interspersed amongst these images are political maps of the subcontinent to convey the work of constructing new borders for new states. Shots of piled up ammunitions suggests preparation for unprecedeted violence, and pictures of completely overcrowded trains document the large displacement of peoples on both sides of the new borders. This opening concludes with the violent image of Gandhi's assassination; in three quick frames of the leader from a side profile, three rapid gunshots punctuate his "literal" fall to the ground.

Then the voice of the film's screenwriter Kaifi Azmi is heard, reading a couplet that establishes the film's themes of division, turbulence, death, desertion, and faithlessness:

<i>Taqsim huwa mulk</i>	The land was divided
<i>Toh dil ho giyeh tukreh</i>	Hearts were shattered
<i>Har sineh main tufaan</i>	Storms raged in every heart
<i>Wahan bhi tha yahan bhi</i>	It was the same here or there
<i>Har ghar mein chita jelti thi</i>	Funeral pyres were lit in every home
<i>Lehartey they sholey</i>	The flames grew higher and higher
<i>Har sheher mein shamshan</i>	Every city was deserted
<i>Wahan bhi tha yahan bhi</i>	It was the same here or there
<i>Gita ki koi sunta</i>	No one heeded the (Bhagavad) Gita
<i>Na Qur'an ki sunta</i>	No one listened to the Qur'an
<i>Hairan tha iman</i>	

wahan bhi tha yahan bhi

Faith had lost all meaning, here or there

The film now moves to color and the image of a train departing from a station. This is a classic image in Indian cinema; it at once signifies modernity and the colonial experience. The train on its departure also signifies the loss, change, and displacement of Partition. Salim Mirza is waving to passengers on the train as it starts to move. He then climbs into the tonga waiting to return to him to his shoe factory. “Who has left this time?” the driver asks. Salim’s sister has left for Karachi, Pakistan, to join her husband who has already immigrated there. After a pause, Salim remarks to the driver that, “they’re uprooting many flowering trees.” This references both the violence of the act of leaving India (uprooting) and the promise and possibility (flowering trees) that these Muslims offered to the place of their birth. The driver is foreboding in his reply: “They’ll whither in these scorching winds...if they are not uprooted, they will dry up.”

There was no singular Muslim experience of Partition and the dislocations that followed it. *Garm Hava* uncovers several Muslim perspectives from the members of the Mirza family. When he was asked about the central dilemma of the film, M.S. Sathyu noted how Partition’s displacements, and the options it offered, were far from consistent for Indian Muslims: “Partition didn’t mean that each community was affected uniformly *en masse* as Hindus and Muslims. Within families, people were also partitioned. That is a basic fact because everyone in Indian Muslim families didn’t think of Pakistan as the right place for them to go.” Muslim options in the years surrounding Partition are usually characterized as the question of whether to leave for Pakistan. Yet the matter of leaving is at the same time one of choosing to remain in India. What is at stake in reframing this logic of Partition is that it brings focus to the often overlooked experience of Muslims who decided to stay in India. *Garm Hava* depicts the partitioning of the extended Mirza family along generational, gendered, and political lines. It reveals different

Muslim positions on the choice to remain in India, and those change over the course of the film.

Partitioning Muslim Loyalties to India

The film's main character Salim Mirza represents a Muslim position that is invested in remaining in India. He fervently believes that the sacrifices of nationalist leaders like Gandhi will not be in vain; according to this logic, now that Gandhi sacrificed his life for the cause of unity, communal violence will not erupt again in Agra. Salim is skeptical of the argument used by many as reason to leave that Pakistan offers new economic opportunities, suggesting early in the film that when Sindhis and Punjabis who have abandoned farm fields in Pakistan find out that Muslims from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have taken them over, they'll return to those fields in retribution and thwart the efforts of Muslim immigrants.

Salim's belief in India as representative of a wider Muslim sentiment is complicated by the ambivalence of other Muslims on the question of staying. Early in the film, Salim Mirza arrives to his normally bustling shoe factory to find it nearly empty. Workers who would normally be busy at their stations are huddled together, reading reports of developments on both sides of the new borders. Newspapers in Delhi report that Hindus and Muslims have begun fraternizing again (*gulley milney lagey*). One in the group, the factory foreman, says that this news is nonsense and produces his own information from Lahore. Salim's return to the factory interrupts their informal meeting and they quickly return to their work places. He questions the foreman: where has everyone gone? Some have left for Pakistan, and those who remain will soon be going. In an emphatic tone, Salim tells him that Gandhi (Gandhi-*ji*) did not die in vain and that the communal violence would cease upon his assassination. "That's just what I have been saying, haven't I?" replies the worker with a smiling face slightly mocking Salim's conviction.

Having just witnessed the foreman dismiss the reports of improved social relations in Delhi, his rhetorical question reveals duplicity in how he treats his boss. Information, and misinformation, heightened the social atmosphere in those areas in North India where mass migrations were taking place.³⁵ In this and other early scenes, the film establishes Salim's belief that conditions in India will improve, as well as the ways in which his stubbornness is mocked and his confidence not shared amongst other Muslims. Salim is nearly a proxy for Gandhi; his insistence on staying is gradually made irrelevant as the dislocations become more and more apparent over the course of the film. This mirrors how Gandhi was similarly marginalized politically in the final years of his life. As he explains several times in the film, Salim leaves decisions in the hands of Allah, who he says will provide in hard times and will make all right in the end. Loyalty to India is a particular ethic for him which is borne out through his relationship with Allah.

Choosing to live and work in India is an act of faith for Salim which is tested several times in the film, both by the new logic of Partition that casts doubts on the nature of Muslim loyalty to India, and the communal violence that erupted in many north Indian cities. In one scene, Salim's tonga driver accidentally runs into a fruit seller's cart, tipping it and all the produce onto the street. Men rush to the scene, pull the driver from his vehicle and start to beat him. He is clearly targeted because of his Muslim identity. Some begin to throw bricks; one strikes Salim on his forehead, causing great injury. Men in the street rush to anger and to inflict injury. Onlookers stare at the scene from rooftops, declining to act and possibly end the conflict. The violence escalates dramatically when men start to throw other objects. Police with their *lathi* sticks enter the scene and finally some start to disperse. In retaliation for his support of his driver, Salim's shoe factory is torched and destroyed. He dismisses the violence done towards him and

³⁵ See "Muslim Exodus from Delhi," in Zamindar, *The Long Partition*, 21-42.

his family: “Nevermind. Now I’ve got less to account for with God. God willing, in a few days everything will be all right.” Salim now takes what is left of his business into his own hands, literally telling others that as long as there is life in his hands he’ll keep working. His livelihood gone, Salim still chooses to remain in India.

In what is perhaps the film’s greatest irony, Salim is later accused of espionage and threatened with arrest. The warrant is delivered to him as he is selling his wares at the shoe market—the literal place where his morality and good character is most important. Salim had sent the plans of the ancestral family home to his brother in Karachi; the police assumed the worst and made the charges of spying. Sikandar explains the “misunderstanding” to his circle of male friends at the tea stall, one of them concludes that, “even with evidence, criminals are set free.” As a Muslim, Salim is now subject to the new logic of Partition that suspects Indian Muslims are all secret spies for Pakistan. The matter of the house plans is settled, but Salim’s wife believes that the police will come up something else to make him out to be a criminal. What of our family’s honor, she asks her husband. He reminds her that he has many friends in town, non-Muslims, who have stood by him and will continue to do so. As she has done so many times in the film, she again questions Salim as to why they have not left India for Pakistan. “Mother is no longer with us. Why don’t we leave from here now?” Salim’s reply to her reveals the ironic situation he is now in, after the false spying accusation: “If we leave now, they will think I was guilty after all.” *Garm Hava* points to the illogical nature of how Partition changed the state’s expectations of Indian Muslims when something as ordinary as sending a relative the plans of the family home is construed as sabotage against the nation.

The film invites comparison between Salim as the honest and loyal Muslim with other Muslim characters who are duplicitous and self-serving. Salim’s ambitious brother Halim Mirza

publicly voices his loyalty and commitment to India, yet in private reveals his true intentions to leave for Pakistan. He represents hypocrisy within the North Indian Muslim political establishment, some of whom claimed unswerving loyalty to India but quickly switched sides as it were, soon after Partition.³⁶ The film undermines and mocks Halim's self-image with suggestions of false flattery as he boasts of his achievements. When his wife requests that he consider the needs of his son as much as he does his constituents, Halim diminishes her as one who has only her son to worry about. He, on the other hand, has a burden of the entire Muslim community on his shoulders. The film ridicules his statement by following it with the sound of mocking celebratory applause. In his words at a political rally, Halim criticizes those Muslims who choose to leave India as faithless and lacking conviction: "India is our country, too...the Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri, the tomb of Salim Chishti. Those who flee from our heritage are cowards. They have no faith in their God. If all the Muslims in India were to leave, one Muslim would still remain. He will stay until he dies...and his name is Halim Mirza." Again, applause for his declaration suggests his duplicity. The film next cuts to Halim and his wife in conversation. He admits what he denied for so long: they must leave for Pakistan, because there is "no place" for Muslims now in India. According to Halim's logic the reciprocity of migration means that Sindhis and Punjabis are abandoning their factories and homes and resettling in India. "We'll go and restart those factories; it'll be the making of us and of Pakistan." Halim and his family are the first of what will be several departures in *Garm Hava*. They leave in secret, thus casting doubts on the integrity and loyalty of the Mirza family that linger throughout the film.

³⁶ See Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, The Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 156.



Fig. 5.3 Halim Mirza declares his fidelity to India

The film's consistent undermining of Halim's position is a critique of political exploitation that is all the more heinous given the violence and discrimination done to Indian Muslims. At dinner with the extended Mirza family, Halim announces his family's plan to leave and then remarks, "I know that if I leave, Indian Muslims will lose courage." His self-importance is undercut in the film because it is represented as simply spectacle and not genuine feeling or conviction. Halim's character is the unethical Muslim opportunist who sneaks away to Pakistan so as not to be noticed by the Indian co-religionists he leaves behind. In this comparison of the ethical dispositions and loyalties of two Muslims, Halim Mirza's grandstanding is criticized for its dishonesty. The film undermines Halim in favor of Salim Mirza, the Muslim of enduring faith in India and loyalty to the place of his birth.

Gendered Partitions

The women of the Mirza family reveal the gendered nature of the choice to stay in India and the violence that the new logics of Partition inflicted on women in particular. This is borne out in Garm Hava in how women are defined by their male relationships and patriarchal structures that bind them to the literal and ideological space of the home. Dadi Amma, Salim's mother, is tied to Agra but more importantly she is anchored in the ancestral home. The film puts her character in a marginal, yet still influential position as the Mirza family grapples with their future. Her frail health is an important reason for the family to remain where they are. Her influence is undercut, however, by the film's presentation of her sentiments and her physical position. Dadi is often shown in rooms and spaces that are adjacent to the central action—in her separate room or in a screened off section. She can still hear the conversations going on, however, and she comments from her off-stage position. When the eviction notice from the Custodian arrives to the house, the family debates how to respond. From outside the frame we hear Dadi Amma's confused response to the summons: "Who has the right to evict me from my home? I gave birth to three sons; who is this third claimant (*haqdar*)?" She is not only a woman tied to place because of her frail health; her marital status as a widow is what also roots her in the home. This is dramatically shown when the Mirza family is ready to move to another home, and Dadi Amma is nowhere to be found. They frantically search for her and she is finally discovered to be crouching behind piles of wood in a small room, hiding from the family and from the move. She refuses to leave because the home is where her husband is buried. As the family forcefully carries her out of the home she cries, "Leave me! Let me die here! What answer will I give my husband on judgement day?" In order for the family to continue remaining in India, she must be physically taken out of that home. The dislocations wrought by Partition and Dadi

Amma's responses to them render her character as symbolic of the previous ways of thinking.

Like Dadi Amma, those assumptions must now be taken out in order for the state to enforce its new ideology of Muslim belonging.

Salim Mirza's daughter Amina is tied to the family home as is her grandmother, and marriage is her only way out of that space. In the course of the film, Amina is engaged twice—first to her cousin Kazim and later, to another cousin, Shamshad. Both men end up leaving India and moving to Pakistan with their families, promising Amina that they will return for her and fulfill their commitment to marry. Kazim returns in an attempt to marry in India when he is arrested for failing to report to the local police. Soon after his family shifts to Pakistan, Shamshad's father arranges his marriage with the daughter of a political ally. When these men fail to fulfill their promise of marriage, Amina's status within the house remains ambivalent. She has also failed to achieve the marital status that is expected of her.

In an absurd twist, Shamshad's mother blames Amina for the failures of these men to return for her: "If Amina is so wonderful, why did Kazim leave her? My Shamshad just felt sorry for her, that is all," she alleges to Amina's mother. Overhearing how her aunt has maligned her, Amina retreats to her room at the top of the family home. Those fabrics for the bride that will not be her are laid out on her bed. She throws the clothes to the floor and buries her head, weeping, on the bed. The film cuts away to images of her courtship with Shamshad that took place at the Taj Mahal, a monument built in the name of love by a bereaved husband. Suddenly she lifts her head, wearing a slightly deranged smile. She rises and finds the intricately woven red bridal veil that her mother has sewn and puts it on, checking the fitting in the mirror. As she views her reflection and wipes the tears from her face, Shamshad appears in the mirror to be standing behind her, in his formal groom attire. Amina turns around and the image of Shamshad walks

away (see Fig. 5.4).



Fig. 5.4 Amina in her bridal veil and Shamshad's apparition in the mirror

Devastated a second time, Amina now sees no way out of her predicament. She takes a razor from a shelf and closes the door to her room, staring straight ahead at the camera and the viewer. She those watching understand both her desperation and their role as witnesses to what she will do next. Still wearing her bridal veil, Amina slits one of her wrists and winches in pain. She lays down on her bed, and blood slowly begins to trickle. The camera moves to her wrist, wearing red bangles that are symbolic of the auspiciousness of marriage for women. A steady flow of blood begins to stain the white sheet. It is made clear that she was successful when her father, Salim, goes to her room to call her for dinner. As he opens the door the camera fixes on his face, shocked and horrified.

The deception of the two men engaged to Amina stands in for the violence done to Muslim women by Partition by severing families, closing borders, and scrutinizing the

movement of people between two new states.³⁷ Amina's choice to take her life suggests that, after a second deceit, she sees no way forward. She has no choice in the matter; as an unmarried woman rejected by the new logic of Partition, the question of whether to stay in India doesn't apply to her. The film demonstrates how the incongruities that inform the new logics of Partition affected the lives of Muslim women who are primarily defined in terms of belonging to men (and the state) through marriage.

Partitions of Muslim Belonging: Patterns of Mistrust and Injustice

Close to Amina in age, her brother Sikandar has a very different association with Indian society and the family's struggle to remain in India. While Amina is confined to the family home and romantic excursions to historic monuments, Sikandar visits offices to interview for jobs, commiserates and strategizes with his fellow unemployed friends, and attends political protests. The contrast could not be more apparent between Amina's life as defined by romantic love and marital prospects, and Sikandar's experiences with unemployment and discrimination. Sikandar is shown studying for his exams and discussing the woes of unemployment with male friends as they drink tea at a local stall. The men devise strategies for political action to draw attention to their plight, and Amina is confined to the familial home and status as a daughter who needs to be married. In terms of the social roles that define them both into categories of female (marriage and family) and male (civic duty and politics), Amina and Sikandar are both rejected by the new ways that Partition shapes how they are understood and what their options are. The new injustices that Indian Muslims are subjected to after Partition are revealed in a comparison of

³⁷ For more on women's experiences of Partition, see Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998).

Muslim male appeals for economic assistance. Sikandar's audition for jobs is mirrored in a scene when his father Salim appeals to a bank for a loan. In these scenes Sathyu has deliberately put the viewer in the position of the official to whom both father and son appeal (see Fig. 6). These scenes voice the moral outrage at how the new logic of Partition has suddenly disqualified both men for jobs and economic opportunities that they more than qualify for.

In one scene, Sikandar is interviewed by Mr. Subrimaniyan. The office decoration is sparse, and a framed photograph of Gandhi on the wall features prominently in the background of this scene. Sikandar, dressed professionally in a navy suit and tie, enters and takes a chair in the center of the frame. The camera angle forces the viewer in the position of the hiring manager; Sikandar is addressing the film's audience about his background and qualifications. "So, you have an interest in sports," the manager begins. "I did," Sikandar replies, but ever since the entry of politics into sports he began to dislike watching matches. The manager laughs softly and politely. There is a long pause, and Sikandar's face goes from genial to betraying a little doubt. The manager addresses him now in English: "Your chances are bright; you seem to be a smart young man." A phone call interrupts the scene and in what we hear from the manager's side of the conversation, it becomes clear that the job has been promised to another candidate. "Mr. Mirza, I am sorry. The post has been filled. They have taken someone else." Sikandar rises to his feet, astonished and beginning to anger. The job was created for someone else, and company by-laws mandate that the position be advertised, despite the deceit of the opportunity. Sikandar turns to leave but the manager has some parting advice for the "promising" young man: "Take my advice. You are wasting your time in this country. Why don't you go to Pakistan? Things will be easier for you there." Sikandar gives a terse thank you and leaves the room. The company's duplicity in offering Sikandar for an interview suggests favoritism and the irrelevant matter of

being qualified. Directed towards the film viewer, Sikandar voices his moral outrage at how the new logic of Partition has disenfranchised and disqualified him for employment that, the hiring managers admit, he is more than qualified for.

Sikandar's interview with Mr. Subrimaniyan is mirrored in a scene when his father Salim goes to check on the status of his loan application at the Punjab National Bank. The Bank manager explains to Salim that the days are now gone when he had the personal authority to approve such loans. "Times have changed," the manager says, "many shoemakers have fled to Pakistan. The Bank has lost a lot of money." Salim replies indignantly: "Why should the ones who neither run nor wish to run, suffer?" The Bank now knows not who to trust and who not to trust. The state casts suspicion on the Muslims that remain in India—if they have not already left, they will leave soon, taking the fortunes of India (literally and figuratively) with them to Pakistan.



Fig. 5.5 Sikandar Mirza (left) and Salim Mirza (right) appeal to the viewer

By positioning the viewer in the position of authority and Muslims as supplicants for money and jobs Sathyu makes his audience part of the social problems that the film explores. Jisha Menon analyzes this positionality as part of Sathyu's agenda to make his viewers complicit in the

exploitation of Muslims through mimesis: “by fusing the audiences’ perspective with that of the decision makers, Sathyu compels his audience to mimetically inhabit the position of the privileged citizen and evaluate his own complicity in the financial, territorial, and professional disempowerment of the minority citizen.”³⁸ That complicity that Sathyu seeks through cinematography and dialogue implicates the viewer in the new distrust of Indian Muslims and puts the audience in a position of power to decide their fate.

Distrust *amongst* Muslims is a problem in post-Partition India and is another theme in the film. In one scene, Salim’s brother-in-law Fakhruddin runs into Baqar on the street. Fakhruddin mentions one by one individuals in the family to ask how they are doing, and Baqar is silent about Halim Mirza’s departure for Pakistan. He clearly wants to continue on his way but Fakhruddin presses him. “May Allah help our people,” Fakhruddin laments. “Do you know why we suffer? Muslims have no faith in each other.” Sensing that his uncle already knows, Baqar confesses that they have indeed left, and the news needed to remain a secret because of the negative repercussions for the family’s shoe business. A distrust that Muslims are doing and saying the “right” things as they navigate discrimination informs a scene when Sikandar is being interviewed again for an office job, this time by a manager who also happens to be Muslim. His hands are tied, he explains to Sikandar: “if I appoint you, they will say it is because we’re both Muslims.” When Sikandar contends that he is not just a Muslim, but that he is highly qualified, the manager reveals that the problem isn’t only their shared and circumspect identity. “Your father was accused of espionage,” he adds. Sikandar dismisses his concern, reminding him that Salim was cleared of all accusations in the court. He pauses, and then remarks that no Hindu interviewer has raised these false claims. “As the only Muslim in the department, I have to be

³⁸ Menon, *The Performance of Nationalism*, 95.

careful,” claims the manager. “All of my relatives are in Karachi, and I don’t correspond with them. Who knows what kind of accusation may come to me.” Sikandar angrily declares that it is Muslim discrimination such as this that ruins any opportunities for Muslim youth. *Garm Hava* reveals that pressures and doubts from both within and outside the community created a difficult and constantly shifting situation for Indian Muslims. Accusations that Indian Muslims were suddenly all saboteurs of the state follow the absurd logics of Partition on several lines. Muslims, as a community, belong to Pakistan and not to India; Muslims in India are agents of Pakistan and work against Indian national interests; Pakistan is the national enemy of the state of India. Muslims like Salim and his son Sikandar want to participate in the progress of independent India, however, and the film offers this ideological message most clearly in its final scenes.

Indian Muslims and Building an Indian Nation

As their twin pleas to the Indian public demonstrate, Sikandar and his father Salim’s trajectories mirror each other as they navigate the public spaces where Muslims were indexed in changing and incongruous ways after Partition. They are depicted navigating their social worlds both alone and with the help of friends and associates. In the face of skepticism and rejection, coupled with the deaths of the two women who anchored him to the home, by the end of the film Salim has given up and decides to move what remains of his family to Pakistan.

Amina’s literal death by suicide and Salim’s social death from the spying allegations prove to be the turning point in his choice to stay. “Everyone is calling me a spy,” he tells his wife. “What kind of a life is this? There is a limit to toleration. There is no point in staying longer.” His wife finally is vindicated with his changed perspective. Not everyone in the family agrees, however. Despite the discrimination he has faced as he searches for a job, Sikandar is not

convinced that they should leave. "We shouldn't run away from India," he maintains. "We should unite and fight for our rights, for our future!" His father and mother are silent, and seemingly unmoved. Salim is shown standing in tears behind the grand Taj Mahal (see Fig. 5), a monument that has come to signify much in the film: a Muslim past that is exceptionally also a proud part of contemporary Indian heritage, the site of Amina's romance and symbolic of her vanquished dreams of becoming a bride, and the symbol of the city of Agra, place of Salim Mirza's birth and also the site where his family was torn apart by the assumptions of and demands placed on Muslims as a result of Partition. "Look, now even Mr. Mirza is leaving," someone from the crowd of well-wishers remarks as the family places the last of their items on the tonga that will take them to the train station.



Fig. 5.6 Salim Mirza tearfully says goodbye to the Taj Mahal

On the way, the tonga enters a crowded street where an agitation is currently taking place.

Demonstrators yell protest slogans and the camera pans out to reveal an energetic crowd holding signs written in Hindi and Urdu: “Give us bread! Give us jobs! Opportunities for all!” The Mirza family is suddenly in the middle of this mass crowd. A friend of Sikandar—already established in the film as a Hindu—spots them. “Oh Sikandar, where are you going?” he asks. Sikandar looks at his father expectantly; he wants his permission to join. “Go, son. I won’t stop you now. How long can one live in isolation?” says a weary and defeated Salim. Sikandar makes his way out of the tonga, and the camera follows him as he pumps his fist in the air along with the others. Salim watches, too, and this is enough to make him change his mind about leaving. “Jamila, I too am weary of living apart from others,” he tells his wife as he hops out of the tonga. A shocked “Oh Allah” is heard from underneath Jamila’s burqa, and Salim hands her the house keys. “Take her back, back to our home,” Salim tells the tonga driver. The film ends with the image of Salim joining the protesting crowd, and the spoken words of a couplet that is a call for social action in the midst of the storm that Partition wrought:

*Jo dur se tufaan ka karte hai nazara
un ke liye tufaan wahan bhi hai yahaan bhi*

Those who view the storm from afar see no difference between here and there

*Dare mei jo mil jaougey ban jaougey dara
yeh waqt ka elaan wahan bhi hai yahaan bhi*

To join in and become a part of it
This is the call of the times, here and there

When asked about what Salim’s choice to join the worker’s protest means, Sathyu explains that it reflects diversity in terms of a unifying problem: “there was a problem of youth unemployment and unemployment does not discriminate on the basis of religion. We have Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims—every community represented. That procession soon turns mainstream and almost flows like a river in which different people are indistinguishable.”³⁹ That the director of *Garm*

³⁹ Joshi, *South Asian Cinema*, 64.

Hava believes a social problem like unemployment is not affected by social discrimination is inconsistent with scenes in the film that illustrate how Muslims were not offered jobs nor loans.

The final scene of the film is a striking image of Muslim participation as Salim and his son again choose India and join the masses in protest. It certainly adheres to the political commitment of people like Sathyu, many in the production team, and IPTA, whose Marxist leanings would emphasize how a popular movement of the people, for the people, is the solution to the social problems of post-independence India. All Indian communities are part of the call to create a more equitable social order. To overcome the violence and dislocations of Partition, Indian Muslims need to participate in Indian society beyond their faith community. There is a place for Muslims in the mass movement, and the promise of this aspect of belonging is what persuades Salim Mirza to step off the tonga delivering them to the station and the train to Pakistan. When asked to explain how he sought to represent Muslims in *Garm Hava*, Sathyu often mentions his desire to show Muslims as part of the mainstream in India—that while there may some Muslims who feel affinities to Pakistan, the majority of Muslims in India are mainstream and nationalist Indian citizens.⁴⁰ In order to make this argument, Sathyu represents Muslims choosing to participate in a mass movement that ultimately seeks national progress. Despite how they have been maligned by society and the state, Indian Muslims in *Garm Hava* choose to participate in building the new Indian nation.

The dual messages that Indian Muslims are outraged, and yet are committed to national progress, undermines the political goals of *Garm Hava*. In the producers' choice to emphasize mainstream Muslims, they had to ultimately silence the voices of maligned Muslims that have emerged in the course of the film. Sikandar's moral anger at nepotism, hypocrisy, and suspicion

⁴⁰ Interview with the author, December 24, 2014.

is subsumed as he chooses to join a diverse coalition of protesters. One wonders if Salim, who has stoically and steadily suffered at the hands of family members, business associates, and general Indian society, has really had a change of heart or if joining with others will give him the courage to continue. Despite the film's detailed and empathetic depiction of Indian Muslim indignation, it is striking that the clearest expression of personal injustice, and the Indian state's complicity in it, comes not from one of the Muslim characters but from a (Hindu). This man is an associate of Mr. Ajmani, a shoe businessman and friend of Salim Mirza who has arrived in Agra from Karachi. Salim sits with him and his associate as they discuss a transaction. Ajmani apologizes for his small, cramped office, remarking that since his arrival in India he hasn't been allotted a nice flat nor nice office by the Custodian. The associate is nostalgic for the spacious places they had built, and then left, in Karachi: "We've suffered such injustice. The politicians tell us to forget. But how can we forget?"

Muslims of course were not the only community to suffer in the violence and displacement of Partition, and the comment rightly conveys that point. Yet *Garm Hava* doesn't go far enough in its ambition to reveal the problems that Muslims faced in post-Partition India when, in the final and penultimate scene, they are depicted as shedding their concerns to participate in a broader social movement. The Indian state has been shown throughout the film to be unable, or unwilling, to act on behalf of Muslims who suffer social and economic injustice. Should Muslims expect that their participation in the national movement for progress will advance their cause? The messages of the film's final scene also reinforce its gendered approach to representing Partition's violence and Muslim responses to it, which ultimately mutes the moral outrage of Muslim women. Jamila, Salim's wife, is relegated back to the home when her husband decides to again choose India. Men in the Mirza family had a choice to remain and fight, while

women like Amina took the injustices inflicted against her and turned them inward, choosing to opt out of what Indian society has to offer her.

Conclusion: Muslim Voices in Bombay Cinema

The disjunction that Partition logic identifies between being Indian and being Muslim is something that the reality of the Indian Muslim directly contradicts. While Bombay cinema's contribution to the discourse of how Muslims belong in India is complicated, these films are important socio-cultural sites for the contestation of ideologies and the imagining of possibilities. The national cinema has represented its largest minority in diverse ways that all carry with them ideological assumptions: exploitative nostalgia for a glorious Mughal past, fetishized portrayals of exaggerated Muslimness, demonized depictions of "Islamic" terror and violence, and as the outside ethical reminder of the rhetorical promises of the American dream. Representations of Muslim experiences in Bombay cinema convey complex and sometimes inconsistent statements about Muslim belonging to the Indian nation. Muslim characters who answer Hindu skepticism of their status with the message that they, too, are loyal to the nation are made to contend with the more frequent Muslim voice in film, which is ambivalent towards or rejects Indian society.

Filmic depictions of Muslims within "progressive" cinema are not immune to the subjective nature of representation. As the messages and viewer responses to *Garm Hava* show, films that are lauded as realistic are also very much operating within dominant discourses about social identities and experiences which render that reality as subjective. The need for films to represent the fictive unity of the nation influences how other themes and content are understood. The agenda of the producers of *Garm Hava* to represent Muslims within a mainstream context sacrificed the more radical potential offered by the narrative. Salim and Sikandar's rage at how

they have been denied in multiple ways by post-Partition logic loses its force when they decide to try again, and participate in mainstream Indian society.

Tropes of Muslim representation in Bombay cinema are similar to other genres of performing Muslim selves. As is the case with theatre, ritual, and historical performance, Muslims in film have a voice that they use to talk back to how they have been unfairly judged, discriminated against, and in many cases economically disenfranchised. The tendency to orientalize Muslim subjects as exotic, strange, and set apart from Indian society is found in film as in other forms of representation. It is a convention that undermines the political objectives that some producers have for their work to be progressive or socially critical.

Film is a setting of performance in which Indian Muslims are depicted as enacting their loyalties and actively participating in movements working for the progress of the nation. This is a different form of demonstration as compared to what Premchand constructed in *Karbala*, in which the need to present national social unity was also a prevailing concern. The embodied nature of how film depicts Muslims literally enacting their national commitments allows the form to construct a more precise impression of reality. In contrast to how Shi'i women in Lucknow construct their place in the nation as part of their Muslim identity, representations in film have a more visible and public profile than the devotional space of the *majlis*. These examples from performance put forth the argument that Indian Muslims are a part of the national project. They also make the point that Muslims choose to participate in Indian social life because they see a personal stake in national progress. Indian Muslims are commonly described as an anxiety for the Indian nation because of the ambivalence which their being symbolizes. Moments of performance suggest that Muslims can also be a source of inspiration for national social life.

Garm Hava (1973):

Director: M.S. Sathyu
Producers: Ishan Arya, M.S. Sathyu, Abu Siwani
Co-Producer: Film Finance Corporation
Story and Screenplay: Ismat Chughtai, Kaifi Azmi, Shama Zaidi
Dialogues: Kaifi Azmi
Lyrics: Kaifi Azmi
Music: Ustad Bahadur Khan
Qawwali: Aziz Ahmed Khan Warsi and Party
Cinematography: Ishan Arya

Cast:

Balraj Sahni (Salim Mirza)
Shaukat Kaifi (Jameela)
Farooq Shaikh (Sikander)
Gita Siddharth (Aamina)
Jalal Agha (Shamshad)

Conclusion: Global Contexts of Muslim Voices in Performance

On a steamy night in August I arrived early at the Alliance Française, the French cultural center that is also one of the main theatre halls in Delhi. I was there to see the play *Pakistan aur Alzheimer's* (Pakistan and Alzheimer's), written by M. Sayeed Alam of Pierrot's Troupe. This is a monologue play featuring the veteran actor Saleem Shah as 86-year-old Ghazanfar Hussain, an Indian Muslim whose family was divided during the 1947 Partition. Many of his relatives left India to start new lives in Pakistan. Despite having Alzheimer's and his old age, Ghazanfar recalls the suffering, violence, and fervor of that event.

The performance is Ghazanfar conversing between his family's past and present through his recollection of memories as he composes a letter to his brother-in-law who lives in Pakistan. The stage is simply arranged: a bed occupies the center, a bookshelf, a nicely woven rug with a wooden stand that holds a Qur'an, and some bedside tables complete the look. During the performance, Ghazanfar moves slowly from the bed, to the chair at stage right, then back to the bed, with the help of a walking stick. Occasionally he speaks to another character who is outside of the room, but for most of the play Ghazanfar speaks to himself, and to his audience.

Pierrot's Troupe publicizes the play as one that uses comedy as a tool to expose the politics behind Partition. As the sole narrator, Ghazanfar's voice represents the voices of many Indian Muslims who chose to stay in independent India. He expresses the anguish that accompanied decisions to leave for Pakistan and describes the ensuing challenges to keep familial relations stable as national policies evolved in order to determine how people moved and crossed new and illogical borders. The fact that he has Alzheimer's allows for a certain amount of forgetting that seems necessary to deal with both the pain and

incomprehensible nature of Partition and its consequences. It also allows for moments of comic relief that are brief respites from the play's serious themes.

The experience of Ghazanfar and his family is also the experience of many Indian families and thus the performance invites reflection on nationalism and South Asian history. Audiences participate in a version of ethical witnessing as the family's past and present stands in for the nation's past and present; both histories are conjured on stage for the audience to bear witness to and examine critically. The ethical voice in the play is also a Muslim voice, which gives Indian Muslims and their histories an important role to play in terms of how audiences reflect on the reasons and ramifications of Partition. During fieldwork, I saw many performances of the play and several lines always generated audience enthusiasm and applause. Perhaps the most popular line is when Ghazanfar declares that "Islam is safe only in India," and not in Pakistan, the nation ostensibly created as the homeland for South Asian Muslims. In fact, applause for this statement was so consistent that I focused on it, and the contradiction I saw in the situation, during my interviews with those who saw the play when I did.

Living in Delhi and being a student of modern Indian history, I found it inconsistent to assert that Islam, and by implication Muslims, are safer inside of India rather than outside of it in light of the fact of historical and contemporary discrimination and violence against the community. I raised the question of why (mainly non-Muslim) audiences loudly applauded this line with several people who had seen the play and one woman's answer stood out to me. She understood the enthusiasm not as an expression of solidarity or empathy with Indian Muslims but as an expression of Indian nationalism. "Of course an audience of Indians would applaud at that line," she said. "It is about India being superior to everything, it is about Indian nationalism, and it really has nothing to do with protecting Muslims," Niti continued. Rather

than seeing a contradiction between how negatively Muslims are treated in India today and the claim that India protects Muslims and their faith, she recognized audience support for the statement as the expression of Indian supremacy and nationalist sentiment. In Niti's view, loyalty to India is the obvious explanation for how audiences positively respond to a line that asserts national protection of Islam in today's divisive social and political climate in Delhi, and beyond.

My reactions indicate how the ambivalences and inconsistencies of performance allow for multiple, and sometimes contradictory, readings of the messages of representation. Niti's remarks that patriotism and nationalism supersede competing interests related to humanizing the Indian Muslim plight demonstrate how social discourse related to the subjects of performance intersect, and also explain perceived incongruities. The examples of performance in this study reveal that Indian Muslims are not represented consistently in terms of how belong (and do not) to national society and culture. Medieval Muslim rulers use the speaking opportunity that performances provide to talk back to how history has judged them as irrational, as is the case with Muhammad bin Tughlaq, or as foreign to Hindustān, as the play *Sons of Babur* shows. Muslim characters in Bombay cinema are represented enacting their loyalties to India, often tested by post-Partition social discrimination and economic disenfranchisement.

The litmus test of loyalty to India and the construction of Muslim as not Indian is inverted in the context of Shi'i women's devotional performances, where the ethics of being Husayni and Indian are given expression by women of several generations. The actions of Husayn and his supporters in the seventh-century battle at Karbala provide a model of ethical Shi'ism defined by sacrifice and standing up for social justice. This moral example is not limited to relations within the community, however. As the women in Lucknow who allowed me to

participate in their rituals demonstrate, ethical Shi'ism also informs their ideas of proper citizenship and social relationships with non-Muslim Indians. Premchand's recourse to the Karbala event for his political drama reveals the ethical inspiration that the history of Karbala offers to all who are aware of its story. His goals with the drama, as he noted, were political, and intended to help unite Hindus and Muslims against British imperialism. This representation also reveals a moment when a Muslim history became the canvas for new ideas of Indian citizenship and secularism based on religion as faith.

Temporality in Muslim Representations

Following the release of *Garm Hava* in 1973, several reviewers bucked the predominant trend of praising the film for its realism. These evaluations were critical of the lag between the events of Partition, and the time it took for a film to be made on the event. One review attacked the film on many fronts, accusing it of being overly sympathetic to the subjective plight of the "minority community." This critic continued to fault the film for being too late:

The biggest weakness, obviously brought to it by the writers is the subjective self-pity for the minority community...the film's sympathy is for those suffering indirect or direct opposition in North India, in the wake of Partition and with several of their own kith and kin flying by night to the new land of a communally based opportunity. In that sense *Garam Hava* is not exactly a film to promote harmony, integration and all that...the film would have been a marvel, if made in 1949 or so. But in 1974, it looks out of place, in the sense of opening up old, healed wounds.¹

This representation of beleaguered Muslims choosing India despite their negative circumstances was, for this reviewer, "out of place," nearly thirty years later. The distance between Salim Mirza's plight and the critic's present rendered the Muslim representations in *Garm Hava* as strange, ill-timed, and when considered in context of his other comments, irrelevant. There is a tendency across performance genres to represent an Indian Muslim identity as a historical one—

¹ "Garam Hava: Stunning, Charming, But Late," in *Star & Style*. June 7, 1974, pg. 21.

a character or experience set in the past. A typology of Muslim representation reveals how the Muslim is set in north India's Mughal past, or in a seventh-century sacred Muslim history, or as the literal symbol of Delhi's past of which only crumbling stone monuments remain. This tendency suggests that, in performances that emphasize Muslim loyalties to India, the only "good" Muslim is one firmly set in India's past. While this ideologically distances Muslims from India's present, nostalgia for a Muslim past that carried social and political power is also related to the assumptions of producers and their estimation of audience expectations.

The choice to render Indian Muslims in the nation's past is not just an artistic one; as I argue in my discussion on the plays *Sons of Babur* and *Karbala*, the film *Garm Hava*, and in Delhi heritage walks, it is also an ideological move that restricts them to India's past, and threatens to exclude them from India's present. These trends in performance suggest a broader problematic in the representation of the Muslim subject in Indian cultural production. An event during fieldwork also suggests that representations of Muslims in India's present are unpopular. The Troupe debuted a new play in the summer of 2013 called *The Undoing*. The story followed three contemporary Muslim women from India and Afghanistan, from different socio-economic statuses, as they dealt with various forms of personal oppression due to patriarchal ideologies. The first production, at the Sri Ram Centre in Delhi, was poorly attended. This was despite the fact that Pierrot's Troupe has a loyal and local fan-base, who turn out in significant numbers for their regular productions. Press reaction was generally positive, but the play's failure to attract an audience meant that any future productions were in doubt. Pierrot's Troupe has a number of successful plays in their repertoire based on Muslim experiences, yet this new drama failed even with their reliable audiences. Their popular performances are based on the lives of nineteenth-century Urdu poets, on historical Muslim elites such as the Mughal emperors, and on the

nationalist figure Maulana Azad. Amongst the many differences between these representations and *The Undoing*, the fact that the latter is a drama that voices contemporary Muslim women's perspectives suggests the irrelevance of their stories for contemporary audiences in Delhi.

In her study of Hindi film and representation, Nandini Bhattacharya relates the cinema's crisis in performing the Indian Muslim as citizen to the larger ways in which Muslims are historically constructed in national memory as "always too early and always too late, an indeterminate embodiment, spectral but carnal."² Her assessment echoes Devji's definition of the Indian Muslim as the incongruous symbol of the failure of Indian unity.³ The ambiguities that Muslims signify for Indian history and social life is one aspect that explains their widespread presence in diverse genres of Indian performance. The popularity of historical Muslims in Indian performance sits uncomfortably with their simultaneous socio-economic marginalization and consistent requirement to prove their loyalties to the nation. Despite the potentially powerful symbolism of visions of India as Muslim in performance, the realities of Indian Muslim life today suggest that, like Zaki, they will continue to feel pressed to act out their loyalties in response to doubts about their belonging.

New Trends in Orientalism in Performing Muslims

Contemporary representations of Muslims across genres of performance both conform to established typologies of Muslim portrayals, and indicate the development of new tropes. The medieval Muslim ruler Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the subject of Chapter one, is rendered explicitly and indirectly as an eccentric despot, thus replicating his incongruous presentation in

² Nandini Bhattacharya, *Hindi Cinema: Repeating the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 99.

³ Devji is quoted in the Introduction.

historiography. Mughal rulers in performances of *Sons of Babur* adhere to the categories of identity and belonging that construct them on a spectrum of being: Akbar is the enlightened and tolerant Muslim, and Aurangzeb is the conservative, orthodox Muslim ruler. These conventions replicate how they are represented in South Asian history. The popularity today of the actor Tom Alter, an American born in India to American parents, suggests a new trend in the performance of Muslims. The high regard he holds with audiences has multiple explanations, however that a white American performs Urdu-language dialogues with near impeccability is what audiences mention the most.⁴ Alter himself symbolizes seemingly conflicting expectations: his exteriority signifies a foreign identity; however by birth and in remaining in India since then, he is a full member of Indian society. My casting in *Sons of Babur* as an Indian-American woman extends this exoticizing phenomenon beyond Muslim representation, since my character in the play was not Muslim. I have a high competency in spoken Hindi-Urdu, and am also American; therefore the shows in which I performed alongside Alter present a style of orientalism in contemporary performance that fetishizes an upper-class, “foreign” embodiment of Indian selves and Muslim subjects. Proficiency in spoken Hindi-Urdu is another trope in this mode of representation. Explaining the enthusiasm for outsiders performing Indian selves is a problematic task without clear evidence to substantiate what are likely diverse reasons. However, as was the case in explaining audience reactions in the *Pakistan Aur Alzheimer*’s performance, it is possible that interest in how foreigners like myself represent being Indian on the stage is to some extent also an expression of pride in our participation.

The role of the social class and political perspectives of producers in how Muslims are

⁴ His reception in both the Indian and international press illustrates this point. See Sanjoy Hazarika, “An American Star Of the Hindi Screen,” *The New York Times*, July 6, 1989; Swaraaj Chauhan, “Tom Alter: Why Indians Love This American,” The Moderate Voice. Accessed online July 10, 2016. URL: <http://themoderatevoice.com/tom-alter-why-indians-love-this-american/>.

represented in diverse settings influences what gets presented, and in which manner. The director and production crew of *Garm Hava* had a socio-political agenda with the film which I argue undermines its crucial Muslim voice of outrage at the absurd logics of Partition. Premchand's intentions for his play on the Karbala event to intervene in the communal politics of nationalism in 1920s north India were threatened by the very assumptions about belonging and history that he endeavored to challenge. The presentation of sacred objects within the *imambarah* of Shi'i homes in Lucknow differs along socio-economic lines; the wealthier families are able to demonstrate their status by constructing single rooms for their *imambarah*, while others do the same with a simple shelf affixed to a wall. The Muslim producers part of the development and staging of the play *Sons of Babur* are not villagers like the Muslim Zaki who risked his life for a cow. Salman Khurshid is a prominent personality in Delhi, due to his ancestral background and his accomplishments in the fields of law and politics. The director of the play, M. Sayeed Alam, has been a prolific producer of historical plays for nearly fifteen years. These men are considered important Muslim personalities in Delhi social and cultural circles.

The connection between the content of presentation and the class of producers may reflect a broader trend in aesthetical judgement and socio-economic status. Pierre Bourdieu identifies a class divide in the apparent disinterest of those with capital in mass market, bourgeois cultural productions.⁵ The important distinction that Bourdieu makes between dominant and dominated classes and aesthetical taste is that those with less capital often do not have the luxury of distancing themselves from the many of the uncomfortable realities of social life. Therefore, this nostalgia for a glorious Mughal past is contextualized in terms of the socio-

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 34.

economic positions of producers and a majority of their audiences. It is an upper-class, wistful disposition linked to a Muslim past of power and cultural prestige. This nostalgia dominates much of historical production in Delhi today. As one of my interlocutors lamented once in conversation, there is no drama for the “common” Muslim man or woman.

Global Contexts of Muslim Performance

Analysis of the themes, contexts, and discourses of Muslim performance in Indian genres is relevant to the study of minority representation in other national contexts. The themes that emerge from diverse processes of production and evaluation of performances of Muslim selves, such as the concern with historical accuracy, expressing ethical dispositions, and indexing how Muslims as a minority relate to the idea of the nation, emerge in similar and different ways when compared to international contexts of performing Muslim selves. The emergence of stand-up comedy as one of many Muslim responses to post 9/11 negative social discrimination and the subsequent global War on Terror is a new genre of performance with international dimensions.⁶ Muslims use publicly performed humor to address the ways in which they are judged as a threat to public safety, and to contest the terms that cast doubt on their abilities to be loyal to the nation and Islam.⁷ Like marginalized Muslims in Indian performance, these men and women talk back to the social assumptions that negatively judge them. Placing how Muslims in Indian performance prove their loyalty in comparison with international examples of Muslim

⁶ American comedians include the “Allah Made Me Funny” troupe (including comedians Azhar Usman, Bryant “Preacher” Moss, and Mohammed Amer), Maysoon Zayid, and Tissa Hami. Shazia Mirza is a popular British Muslim stand-up performer.

⁷ For studies of the sociology of American Muslim humor and performance, see Jaclyn Michael, “American Muslims Stand Up and Speak Out: Trajectories of Humor in Muslim American Stand-Up Comedy,” *Contemporary Islam* 7:2 (2013), and Mucahit Bilici, *Finding Mecca in America: How Islam is Becoming an American Religion* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

performance reveals the numerous ways that this community is expected to enact their fidelity to the nation as proof of their social belonging. While these comparisons expose the global and contemporary nature of the suspicion and the discrimination that Muslims face, they also confirm the centrality of performance as a form for minority expression and to contest majority assumptions about their place in society.

Discourse about terrorist violence and Muslim connections to it is a hallmark of the public sphere in a post-9/11 era. Media attention on Muslims is an international phenomenon, and when significant episodes of violence occur, Muslims are often the first to publicly voice their disassociation, or their condemnation, of terrorism. These, too, are performances of Muslim selves and often of Muslim loyalties to peace, non-violence, and the secular project. Vigils held in public squares where Muslims, along with many others, come together to publicly perform their rejection of social violence is a presentation of Muslim being meant to make a social statement. Interpreting these events using the language of performance emphasizes the role of embodiment to political protest, and the need to continually re-signify (and contest) what the identity of the Muslim is in the early twenty-first century.

Performance makes visible that which is often unseen or assumed in social and cultural discourse. It is a method that Muslims, but of course not only Muslims, employ in order to contest the terms that judge them as distant, separate, and an anxiety for national belonging in global contexts. Although the claims about belonging they express in representational contexts are often overlooked, Muslims talking back to history and the present in performative situations are important rejoinders to narrow assumptions of identity, community, and the nation. These are visions of Muslim self-statement that remain alive in global, historical, and social moments of performance.

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