

Practising Fractal Shi'i Identities through Muharram Rituals in Mumbai

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Abstract

This article explains the Shi'a-Muslims in Mumbai as a fractal society, a social organisation constituted of numerous social segments, each with its own shape and structure. As a result, this article refers to Shi'i *identities*, not one single Shi'i *identity*. In particular, the discussion explores how the fractal organisation of Shi'a society and diverse Shi'i identities are practised through Muharram rituals. This paper shows that each Shi'a community has invented and reinvented its identity over time through Muharram rituals, and that Mumbai as a cosmopolitan city has intensified the need for the reinvention of identities.

The idea for this paper was conceived at the beginning of my fieldwork in Mumbai in 2009, when I was faced with a tsunami of names of different Shi'a-Muslim communities. Most of my early interviews were saturated with discussions about distinct Shi'a communities. Among Shi'as in Mumbai, the religious diversity is multiplied by ethnic diversity, with the Shi'a community including groups such as the Khojas, the Daowdi Bohras, the Iranians (known as Moghuls), Hindustani Shi'as, and the Baluchis. The full picture of this diversity can be perceived only by taking into account the fact that the Khojas divided into the Ithna-Asharis and Nizari Isma'ilis,¹ and the fact that the Bohras are Isma'ili but follow the school of Musta'ali Isma'ili. In India, all of these groups are usually regarded simply as the Shi'a community. However, as each group insists on its own distinct identity, Shi'as appear to be a fractal society rather than a solid and integrated community.

The notion of *fractal* is borrowed from *fractal geometry*, which studies complex geometrical forms that consist of an endless number of parts.

¹ There are two schools of Ismailis in religious terms - Nazari and Musta'ali.

A fractal shape can be split into parts whose own shape is similar to the whole (e.g. see Batty 1985; 2005). In this specific context, fractal society refers to a social organisation constituted based on numerous social segments, each of which has its own shape and structure. While a fractal society is envisaged as a solid and integrated social group from the outsider's point of view, each of the groups in such a society has its own organisation and insists on its own independent identity. The benefit of using the term 'fractal society' is that it allows one to consider the identity of each group without rejecting the macro image by which a fractal society is commonly perceived. The idea is to accept the macro image of a fractal society without reducing the social reality to such an overall image.

This article focuses on the Muharram rituals among Shi'i groups in Mumbai so as to delineate the diverse Shi'i identities in the city. The rituals are the most important Shi'i practice, aimed at commemorating the tragic martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, in the seventh century. The dynamics of the Muharram rituals in Mumbai have mainly been studied by examining British colonial policies and

the Hindu-Muslim conflict (see Edwardes 1912 and 1923; Kidambi 2007; Masselos 1982). The interactions among Shi'a communities in Mumbai have so far not been significantly explored. Thus this article emphasises a shift from political attention to anthropological attention in studying religious ritual as constitutive of changing social identities. The article argues that although there is some degree of cohesion between the Shi'a communities, the assortment of diverse ethnicities and Shi'i schools/sects constitutes a fractal social system.

The interaction and dispute among Shi'i groups in Mumbai have led to different ways of commemorating the tragedy of Hussein's death. There are few, if any, cities in the world where we can discover as many sects of Shi'a as in Mumbai. Mumbai appears to be an interesting case study not only due to such diversity, but also due to the fact that this cosmopolitan city was historically the cause of new policies that some Shi'a communities now follow to distinguish their identity from others.

This article begins by briefly introducing the Sunni-Shi'a division, the background of Muharram rituals in Mumbai, and Shi'a communities in Mumbai today. As it is rather difficult to explore all the Shi'i communities in Mumbai in a single paper, this article focuses on four communities: the Khoja Nizari Isma'ilis, the Bohras, the Hindustani Shi'a from Uttar Pradesh, and Iranian Shi'a, and explains how each of these groups follows certain ritual policies or techniques to practise its own identity.

The Sunni-Shi'a division and the tragedy of Ashura

The first half of the seventh century was a time of political struggle and dispute over the legitimate successor of the prophet Mohammad (d. 632) and the early Caliphs. Kasravi (1944) mentions that the Sunni-Shi'a division emerged in particular due to the dispute over the successor of Ali, the fourth Caliph. Ali, like the second and third Caliphs, was assassinated; then Mu'awiyah, who was the governor of Syria and had revolted against Ali, came to power and established the Umayyad Caliphs (r. 662-750). Ayoub (1987), like

other devout Shi'a scholars, argues that after the death of Mu'awiyah, his son Yazid succeeded him by hereditary appointment in 680 rather than by election or popularity. Consequently, Muslim society was divided into two main parts: supporters of Ali's family, as the Shi'at al-Ali -- meaning the party of Ali -- or the Mu'awiyah family, as Sunni. The dispute over the legitimacy of Umayyad and Yazid's authority led to a tragic battle on Ashura day -- the 10th of the month of Muharram -- in Karbala (in modern Iraq) in 680, when Hussein, the second son of Ali and grandson of the prophet, and a small number of his companions were martyred.

Although the division of Muslims into Sunni and Shi'i parts occurred prior to the tragedy of Ashura, this event has particularly well established the division. From the Shi'i point of view, the tragedy of Karbala is more than a historic battle that took place over a political dispute and transcended into 'meta-history' (Chelkowski 1988, 263). The memory of the tragedy has profoundly influenced Shi'i thought and identity to such a degree that Michael Fischer has called it *the Karbala paradigm*. He states that the tragedy 'provides a way of clearly demarcating Shi'ite understanding from the Sunni understanding of Islam and Islamic history' (1980, 21).

Tabatabaei (1988, 85) notes that the Shi'i doctrine of *imamat* differentiates Shi'i and Sunni sects. Shi'as argue that the Muslim community should be led by a religious leader, known as an *imam*, rather than a caliph. These *imams* are the descendants of the prophet Mohammad by his daughter, Fatemah, and his cousin and son-in-law, Ali. However, disputes over identifying *imam* among the prophet's descendants subdivided the Shi'a into the sects of Ithna-Ashari, Isma'ili, Zaidi, and Alavi.² For example, the Zaidis divided from the mainstream of the Shi'i school over identifying the 5th *imam*, and the Isma'ilis branched over disagreement about the 7th *imam*. In fact, it is a never-ending story, since each sect has been divided into sub-sects throughout his-

² Ithna-Asharis (or twelvers) are currently the majority of Shi'as. They recognise twelve *imams*. For an extensive discussion on this subject, see Halm (1991), and Momen (1985).

tory. Apart from all these differences between Shi'i sects, the Ashura tragedy and its commemoration have played a key role in constituting all Shi'i schools of thought.

The commemorative rituals of Ashura originated in the Arab environment in Iraq, influenced by the Buyid dynasty (ca. tenth-eleventh century) in Iran and Iraq and the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt. Shi'i culture and rituals were mainly developed in Iran during the Safavid era (sixteenth-eighteenth centuries), and spread throughout the Indian subcontinent (Calmard 1996). As Howarth (2005) notes, Safavids not only initiated the most flourishing Shi'i cultural era in Iran, but were also one of the primary forces in spreading the Shi'i faith to India.

The background of Shi'as and Muharram rituals in Mumbai

Although Marathi nationalists claim that the history of Mumbai stretches back a long time, Mumbai, as it is today, was mainly shaped in the late eighteenth and particularly the nineteenth centuries. Mumbai as a cosmopolitan city has been shaped by being the destination of immigrants from all over India and beyond throughout the last two centuries. During the nineteenth century, the Shi'a communities of Mumbai were mainly composed of traders from Iran and Gujarat, including Khojas and Bohras. However, this demographic make-up drastically changed during the twentieth century, particularly with major Shi'a immigration from Uttar Pradesh (UP). The history of Shi'as in UP dates back to the eighteenth century. Lucknow, the capital of UP, is still a major Shi'i city in India today.

Muharram rituals associated with Shi'a communities in the Middle East and commemorating Ashura signify the division of Shi'a from Sunni communities. However, Muharram rituals metamorphosed into non-Shi'i rituals in India. As Kidambi (2007) remarks, even Hindus participated in the rituals in Mumbai during the nineteenth century. In fact, observing Ashura day was an inter-community/inter-religion event and the procession on Ashura day was the greatest festival of Mumbai during the nineteenth century,

often called the *taboot* procession.³ Birdwood (1915) described the procession as the most picturesque event of South Asia.

The Muharram rituals in Mumbai have radically changed since the nineteenth century. The commemorative act as an inter-communal festival came to an end with the riot of 1893. Edwardes, the Commissioner of Police of Bombay at the time, argued that the riot of 1893 broke out as a result of the Hindu Nationalist movement led by Tilak. The movement was initially anti-British, but Tilak widened his movement against Muslims as well (Edwardes 1923, 104–105). Violence between Muslims and Hindus during the month of Muharram became so frequent in the following years that colonial authorities put tight regulations in place regarding the Muharram rituals. The regulation imposed in 1912, during Edwardes' era, was particularly important in transforming the Ashura commemoration in Mumbai. This regulation banned the issuing of licences for non-Muslims who wished to carry out the procession (Anon. 1912, 5). In reality, the regulation (1912) indirectly stopped the procession and was part of the process that gradually made the commemoration a solely Shi'i ritual in Mumbai. Although the Ashura commemoration is still known as the Muslims' (both Shi'a and Sunni) ritual in Indian cities, it is mainly a Shi'i ritual in Mumbai.⁴

This brief background of Muharram rituals in Mumbai provides a narrative of the macro dynamics of the rituals over the time. This narrative is based on the colonial policies, interaction between Hindus and Muslims or Shi'as and Sunnis, and the perception of Shi'as as a solid community. This approach captures the dynamics of the rituals at large. Much attention has been paid in the media as well as in academia to the interaction between Hindus and Muslims mainly because of the consequences of the

³ *Taboot*, also written *tabut*, means coffin. The procession was named after *taboot* since people carried symbolic coffins of Karbala martyrs throughout the procession.

⁴ Arguably, Dahrawi is an exceptional area in Mumbai, where the procession of Ashura day is dominated by Sunnis.

India-Pakistan partitioning (in the 1940s) and the breaking out of violence over the Babari Masjid incident in the early 1990s. This has led to internal interactions among Shi'as being neglected. In other words, the interaction among Shi'as is overshadowed by the tension between Hindus and Muslims. However, there was almost no discussion during my fieldwork interviews about Hindu-Muslim tensions or the effect of the violence in the 1990s on Muharram processions in Mumbai. Instead, interviewees widely addressed how each Shi'a community practises its own distinct identity through the rituals. This particularly points to the importance of paying attention to the interactions among the Shi'a communities. Notably, the next subject most frequently addressed by interviewees was the recent tension between Shi'a communities and the rising Wahhabi-Sunni population in Mumbai.

The Shi'a communities of Mumbai today

Nineteenth-century Mumbai was mainly divided into two parts, the Fort and the native town. Shi'a communities mainly established their community places in the northeast part of the native town, known as Ward B (today called Dongri), also often referred to as Bendhi Bazaar. Although the Shi'i population was concentrated in Dongri, they gradually scattered all over greater Mumbai. Currently, apart from Dongri the Shi'as are scattered in Bandra, Mira Rd, Malard, Korla, Govandi, and up to Jogeshwari, Andheri, and Mumbra. Dongri is no longer the main Shi'i settlement; Lotus Colony in Govandi and even Mumbra, where Shi'as from UP mainly settle, appear to be more important than Dongri in terms of the Shi'i population today.⁵

The Shi'as practise Muharram rituals in all aforementioned areas; however, Dongri remains the centre for Muharram rituals. When I asked about the reason for this, Baqir Balaghi stated that 'Bendhi Bazaar is the centre of the city; Muslims used to be here, then later gradually

scattered into the suburbs. Initially, the *julus* [procession] was carried out here and when people moved out [to the suburbs], they practise [procession] there as well, but they keep the centre at Bendhi Bazaar.' Baqir is a Shi'a originally from Kashmir and currently living in Mumbra. His father was a Shi'a clergyman who studied in Iraq and Iran; and his family moved to Mumbai during the 1990s. Baqir emphasised that 'If somebody ask you, have you seen Bombay's Ashura? That means, have you seen Ashura in Bendhi Bazaar?' (December 2009, Mumbai).

The major Shi'i places, including Khoja Ithna-Ashari Jame Masjid, Moghul Masjid, Saifee Masjid, Rowdat al-Tahera, Namazi Imambara, Shushtari Imambara, Amin Imambara, Anjuman-i Fotowat-i Yazdian, Imamiyeh Masjid and Kaiser Baug, are located within walking distance of each other in Dongri. The concentration of all these places in Dongri makes the area a ritual arena during Muharram. What particularly differentiates Dongri from the other Shi'i areas is that each area in the suburb is mainly associated with a certain Shi'a community. However, Dongri is where most of the Shi'i ethnic groups/sects have a historical connection due to their initial and most important community/religious place. Through a short walk around Dongri, you can experience the diverse cultural background of the Shi'a communities through the architecture of religious places. Moghul Masjid, arguably the oldest Shi'i building in Mumbai, is a wonderful example of Iranian Qajarid architecture. Khoja Masjid clearly addresses the pure Moghul-Islamic architecture, and manifests the division of the Khojas into two parts, Isma'ili and Ithna-Ashari. The Rowzat al-Tahera of the Bohras celebrates the Fatimid architecture of Egypt.

From solidarity to division: The shift of Aga Khan policies on commemorating the Ashura tragedy

Khoja Isma'ilis have always been the main body of Nizari Isma'ilis, who follow Aga Khan, in Mumbai. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Mumbai has been a kind of capital city for Nizari Isma'ilis as their living *imams*, the Aga Khans, resided in Mumbai. However, Aga Khan III mainly stayed

⁵ Unfortunately, there is no official figure about the Shi'a population, but this is a common perception about the distribution of Shi'as in Mumbai. People may talk about population numbers, but these numbers are not reliable.

in Europe since in the late 1910s, and therefore Mumbai gradually lost its significance for the Nizaris. Moreover, the population of the Khoja Isma'ili community decreased due to immigration to North America, so the community is not as present in Mumbai as before. Apart from demographic change, the intimacy of Nizaris with other Shi'a communities in Mumbai has drastically changed since the 1910s when Aga Khan III introduced a major reform both in the creed and rituals of Nizari Isma'ilis. Currently, the Khoja Isma'ilis have the least intimacy with other Shi'a communities in Mumbai; the lack of cohesion between this community and other Shi'as is particularly exhibited during Muharram. While all Shi'i places are crowded and vibrant during Muharram, Nizaris' places remain quiet since they no longer commemorate the Ashura tragedy. This sharply distinguishes Khoja Isma'ilis from the other Shi'a communities to the extent that some Shi'a fanatics in Mumbai even claim that the Nizari Isma'ilis are not Muslim. Such a claim has mainly been raised since the Aga Khan III's reform. This following section reviews the shift of the Aga Khans' policy on commemorating the Ashura tragedy since the arrival of Aga Khan I in Mumbai.

Hasan Ali Shah became the 46th Nizari *imam* in 1817 in Iran. He developed a good relationship with the Qajar court and was honoured with the royal title of Aga Khan by Fath-ali Shah of Qajar, the king of Iran. However, after the death of Fath-ali Shah, the good relationship between Aga Khan and the Qajar court was not sustained. After the failure of the Aga Khan's rebellions against the Qajars, he decided to seek refuge in India and arrived in Mumbai in 1846. Having already developed a good relationship with the British when he was in Iran, he enjoyed their support in India.⁶

When the Aga Khan arrived in India he had a direct connection with his wealthy followers, the Khojas. The Khojas were a Sindi and Gujarati trading group who had begun to settle in Mumbai in the nineteenth century. The social organisations

of the Khoja community, constituted over centuries, were affected by the presence Aga Khan among them, and therefore some members of the community challenged Aga Khan's authority. They basically rejected that the Khojas were Shi'a, claiming that the community had a Sunni background. The authority of the Aga Khan was challenged through a court case in Mumbai, a typical procedure during colonial times. Aga Khan, however, succeeded in establishing his authority by the hand of the Bombay High Court in 1866.⁷ Consequently, Aga Khan officially stated and legally registered the Khoja community as 'Shi'a Imami Isma'ili' (Daftary 2007, 476). As Devji (2009, x) notes, the title of Isma'ili was a kind of 'invention of tradition'; Khojas had never identified themselves with that title, and it only existed in specialised Sunni textbooks.

In order to stress the Shi'i aspect of the Khojas's faith, Aga Khan emphasised and promoted the mourning service sessions of Muharram. Masselos (1982) notes that Aga Khan held the service sessions at his house in Mumbai. He also joined the service sessions held by Shi'a Ithna-Asharis at the Iranians' Imambara in Mumbai. Aga Khan came to India from Qajarid Iran, where Muharram rituals shaped social life and public culture. In fact, Qajar kings (ca. eighteenth-twentieth centuries) used the Muharram rituals as a medium to shape, influence, and control Iranian society (e.g. see Aghaie 2005). Therefore, unsurprisingly, Aga Khan used that policy too; he promoted commemorating Muharram to fulfil his political and religious authority over the Khojas. Boivin even argues that Aga Khan introduced the Ithna-Ashari rituals to the Khojas upon his arrival in India, aiming to alter the influence of Sufi leaders (*sayyids* and *pirs*) and establish his authority (2008, 156–157).

After the short era of Aga Khan II, Aga Khan III became the Nizari Imam in 1885. During his reign, some of the Iranian Shi'a clergymen in Mumbai

⁶ For an extensive review of this period, see Daftari (2007, 463–474).

⁷ The 1860s judgment had a major effect on the social constitution of the Nizari Isma'ilis. As Devji (2009, xi) has mentioned, even Aga Khan III had deferred the legitimacy of his authority over the Khojas, as living *imam*, to the judgment of the Bombay High Court in the 1860s.

were actively involved in converting the Khojas to Ithna-Ashari. In that situation, the Khoja community was divided into Isma'ili and Ithna-Ashari parts, often referred to as *Bardi* (majority) and *Chori* (minority) *jamat*. The tensions between the two *jamats* (communities) were especially raised when the Ithna-Ashari part built their mosque, known as Khoja Jame Masjid, just next to the Jamat Khaneh⁸ in Dongri. While Aga Khan I was challenged in the name of Sunnism, Shi'a Ithna-Asharis challenged the authority of Aga Khan III.

Aga Khan III also faced a major court case filed against him by members of his family in Mumbai because of a dispute over the heritage of Aga Khan I. It is often called the Haji Bibi Case in reference to the lady who led it.⁹ In 1908 the case was ended in favour of Agha Khan III; it particularly established that 'the Nizari Khojas were distinct from the Shi'as of the Ithna-Ashari school, since the plaintiffs had claimed adherence to Twelver Shiism' (Daftary, 2007, 481). After the Haji Bibi case, Aga Khan III, who had already started a reform, actively emphasised the differentiation of his followers from the Ithna-Ashari Shi'as based on a fundamental reform in creed and ritual of the Isma'ili sect.

In 1910, Aga Khan III also discouraged his followers in Iran from joining the Ithna-Ashari Shi'as for Muharram rituals. He argued that the Nizaris had a living and present *imam* and did not need to commemorate any of their dead imams (Daftary 2007, 492). Although the forbidding of commemorating the Ashura tragedy was part of a much larger reform¹⁰, stopping the ritual was a major shift as the tragedy of Ashura plays a central role in Shi'i theology and culture. Therefore such a shift sharply delineated Nizari Isma'ilis from all other Shi'as, including Musta'ali Isma'ilis (the Bohras) in Mumbai. Nowadays, during Muharram, Khoja Jame Masjid in Dongri is crowded and vibrant; however, literally right next to the mosque, the Nazaris' Jamat Khaneh with

its beautiful clock tower is quiet and looks like an empty colonial building whose time is over.

The shift of the Aga Khans' policy on the Muharram rituals was particularly the result of the cosmopolitan context of Mumbai, where different Shi'a groups interacted and challenged each other. In such a diverse Shi'i context, the communities encountered each other and needed to constantly reinvent their identities over time. The policy shift of the Aga Khans from promoting to banning the Muharram rituals is a very good example of the need to reinvent the community identity in the rapidly changing contexts of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mumbai.

The Bohras

The black flags at the entrance of the houses of Shi'as signify the beginning of the month of Muharram. The Bohras chose to differentiate themselves from other Shi'as by identifying the beginning of the lunar month of Muharram in a different way. The orthodox traditional community of Bohra Isma'ilis follow the traditional Egyptian lunar calendar, signifying the background of Isma'ilism among the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt. The dynasty firmly established the Isma'ili sect and significantly contributed to the development of Shi'i culture, theology, and philosophy. Based on the traditional Egyptian calendar, the beginning of the lunar month is identified differently compared to the common Arabic lunar calendar. For example, in 2010, the month of Muharram began a day earlier based on the Egyptian calendar. Therefore the Bohras and other Shi'as commemorate the day of Ashura, the 10th of Muharram, on different days.

Generally, the period of mourning begins from the first of Muharram until 40 days after Ashura day, known as the day of *Arba'ain*¹¹ (the 20th of the month of Safar). In other words, the commemoration is carried out over 50 days. The rituals mainly take place during the first ten days of Muharram, and are particularly intensified during the 7th-10th of Muharram. Dongri is gradually transformed within the first couple of days

⁸ Jamat Khaneh is the community place of Nizari Isma'ilis.

⁹ She was the cousin of Aga Khan III.

¹⁰ For more on this topic, see Boivin (2008, 170).

¹¹ *Arba'ain* is an Arabic term, meaning 40th.

of Muharram into a ritual arena. The cityscape is changed using flags, banners, and particularly by *sabils* that are temporarily set up in the streets. The density of flags, banners, and *sabils* in the streets demarcate the main territory that Shi'as claim for Muharram rituals. *Sabil* means donation in Arabic, however, in Mumbai it refers to a kind of stall that varies in shape and size. A *sabil* would be a small stall where a couple of *mankas* (clay pots) offer drinking water;¹² it can also be a large stall where water, *sherbet*, tea, and food are served as *niaz* (donation).

The first thing that anyone would notice on a short walk around Dongri during Muharram is the transition from the Ithna-Asharis' territory into the Bohras'. The Ithna-Asharis' *sabils* are mainly covered with black textiles, as black is simply the colour of grief. However, the Bohras' *sabils* are very colourful and completely covered with flowers. This display signals the Hindu background of the Bohras and can also be perceived as a symbolic way of glorifying the status of the Karbala martyrs.



Figure 1: A Bohras' *sabil*, Dongri, Mumbai, December 2009.

The Ashura tragedy is a common historical memory around which the intimacy among all Shi'i sects would be expressed. At the same time, the inter-community relationship is weakened mainly because solidarity within each Shi'a community is stimulated during Muharram. This idea

¹² Water is offered in memory of Hussein and his companions, whose access to water was cut in the hot desert of Karbala.

particularly applies to the case of the Bohras. As Blank (2001, 84) explains, at no other time during the year is the Bohra community as close as during Muharram, when their identity is redefined. Muharram is the time that this hierarchical community practises its social organisation and manifests its social exclusiveness. For the Bohra community, the Muharram observance is mainly focused on *majlises*, service sessions, which are very exclusively for the members of the community. Although such exclusiveness may not be officially announced, it is clearly practised.

I did participatory observation during Muharram in 2009 and 2010 in Mumbai. During my first fieldwork, I quickly realised that it is rather difficult to attend a Bohras' *majlis*. As the community is hierarchically constituted, for an outsider to attend a *majlis* it is necessary that they be invited and accompanied by an influential member of the community. In 2009, I was not able to attend a *majlis*; after a long time spent networking, apparently I had enough privilege to be invited by Mr. Abbas Master to a *majlis* in 2010. Abbas Master is the CEO of SBUT,¹³ responsible for the major redevelopment of the Bendhi Bazar and Bohra Mohalla.

Abbas Master called me one late night to confirm that I was invited to the *majlis* at Saifee Masjid the next day. He mentioned that I might have the privilege of meeting the highness Sayyeda Mohammed Burhanuddin, the spiritual leader of the Bohras, who would deliver his sermon at the mosque. I asked him about any necessary customs for attending the *majlis*; he replied that it is only necessary to have my head covered. He asked me to meet him at his office early in the morning as he expected a great rush before the *majlis*, which would begin around 10am. I was in Dongri very early the next morning to get a *topi*, a traditional white hat that the Bohra men wear. Arriving at the Bohra Mohalla, I realised that the whole area was changed and gated for the *majlises*.

¹³ Saifee Burhani, Upliftment Trust.

Abbas Master later told me that the highness Sayyeda Mohammed Burhanuddin announces where he is going to deliver his Muharram sermon before Muharram and then Bohras will travel from all over the world to that place. Sayyeda addressed the *majlis* in Mumbai in 2009 and 2010 and in Tanzania in 2008. As *The Times of India* (TOI) reported, 'since the Sayyeda's speech is considered sacred for every Bohra, there is a great rush to be at his *majlis*. The attendees received their invitations after registering by e-mail. Nearly two lakh¹⁴ Bohras from across the world are in town and around 32,000 get to sit in the massive mosque at a time' (Wajihuddin 2010, 7). In order to control such a large number of attendees, all roads around Saifee Masjid and Rowzat al-Taherah, in Dongri, were gated and assigned a number. People passed the gates by showing a registration card and their spot in the *majlis*.

In the company of Abbas Master, we passed through the gates and sat at Rowzat al-Taherah. Shortly after that, not only Saifee Masjid and Rowzat al-Taherah, but all the surrounding streets were packed. In fact, the official number of 32,000 only accounted for those who sat inside the mosque and Rowzat al-Taherah, not those Bohras who stood in the streets. There was literally no 'outsider' in the whole crowd, inside or outside of the two places. I was, indeed, the only outsider attendee at the *majlis*. Obviously, this *majlis* was an exclusive event; this was particularly evident as Bohras men wear white dresses and *topi*, and the women wear colourful dresses.

I came back from the *majlis* and met my local Ithna-Ashari Shi'a friends who also lived in Dongri. They were quite shocked when they heard that I had attended the *majlis*. Then I shared with them the photos that I had taken during my attendance. Their reaction was rather interesting: They told me that 'we have never seen these scenes as we are simply not allowed to go there during the Bohras' *majlis*' (based on the reaction of Habib Nasser and Ali Namazi).

¹⁴ A lakh equals 100,000.



Figure 2: It was an emotional time for Bohras at Rowzat al-Tahera when their spiritual head, Sayyeda Mohammed Burhanuddin, passed by after the *majlis*, Mumbai December 2010.



Figure 3: The crowd during the Bohras' *majlis*, Mumbai, December 2010.

Bohras commemorate the Ashura tragedy solely based on *majlis*. Unlike other Shi'a communities in Mumbai, they do not run processions during Muharram. The *majlis* is essentially a congregation, it enables the community to practise and maintain solidarity among the members. However, the interaction with other social groups is

minimised when the commemoration is solely based on *majlis*, especially when it is an exclusive ritual. In contrast, the processions are spatially dispersed, thus it is all about crossing borders and boundaries in the city. The procession maximises the engagement of communities, commonly associated with some tension. In other words, Bohras' rituals are spatially organised in a way that the community can practise its solidarity and social exclusiveness, and avoid social tension; these are all social characteristics of this community.

The Bohra community, however, is not a self-segregated community. I saw many individual Bohra who attended *majlises* at Ithna-Ashari places, especially at Moghul Masjid. Ali Namazi, the manager of Moghul Masjid, said that the sermons delivered in the evenings by Molana Saheb Athar, a popular orator, attract a lot of Bohras to the mosque during Muharram. Nevertheless, this is not an organised attendance, and is based on individual preference.

Although Bohras do not engage in processions, they actively support and appreciate the processions of the Ithna-Asharis to show their intimacy with them. The Saifee Ambulance Service, associated with Bohras, can be seen everywhere throughout the procession route in order to give medical services to those who practise flagellation throughout the processions. Moreover, when processions pass Bohra locales, they enthusiastically support the procession by serving food and drink. In the landscape of Muharram commemoration, the Bohras practise a strong internal solidarity at the same time that they keep a degree of intimacy with other Shi'a communities in Mumbai.

The Iranian community: Practising their own distinct identity

Iranians arguably were one of the first Shi'i communities in Mumbai. They were never a significant Shi'a community in terms of population size, but they have always been an influential one. This influence is partly based on the role of Iranians in spreading the Shi'i faith in India through Isma'ili missionaries, even before the Safavid Shi'i dynasty. Shi'i Islam in India has always been

associated with Iran. For example, in describing the Shi'i faith in the *Gazetteer of Bombay*, it was noted that Shi'as follow 12 *imams* instead of Caliphs, and they 'claim that their *mujtaheds* or religious superiors in Persia have power to alter the spiritual and temporal law' (Edwardes 1909, 2:171).

The influence of the Iranian community among Shi'i communities in Mumbai is three-fold: first, the Iranian community had a historical role in spreading Shi'a Islam into India, which is not the main subject of this paper. Second, the Iranian community was a major contributor to the establishment of religious places in Mumbai. Lastly, the community played a crucial role in keeping and reviving the Muharram rituals in Mumbai.

The oral history of the Iranian community relates that the earliest group of Iranians arrived in Mumbai during the first half of the nineteenth century. These were influential traders who mainly came from the southern cities of Shiraz and Lar. These traders were major contributors to the building of religious places in Mumbai. The majority of the Shi'i places in Dongri were established by and named after these traders. A famous trader, Haj Mohammad Hussein Shirazi, built the Iranian Mosque, often called Moghul Masjid, in the 1860s. This is arguably the most important and oldest major Shi'i place in the city. The Shushtari and Amin¹⁵ *imambaras* are other well-known Shi'i places in Dongri established by Iranian traders during the late nineteenth century.



Figure 4: Iranian Mosque, often known as Moghul Masjid, Mumbai, April 2010.

¹⁵ Named after its founder, Haji Zain al-Abdin-e Amin al-Tojar Shirazi.

The elite traders joined with a group of sailors from the port city of Bushehr in the south of Iran. Although this group is not noted in historical documents and studies, its current members still live in Mumbai, especially in the Dongri area. From their hometown, they brought specific Muharram rituals to Mumbai. The community still performs on *damam*, a traditional drum played in the port city of Bushehr, during Muharram through processions in Dongri. Another ritual that they brought to Mumbai and still practise is called 'Bushehri Matam', interestingly practised by Hindustani Shi'as and not the Iranians. Firoz Shakir (interviewed November & December 2009) has talked about practising the ritual of Bushehri Matam in Bandra East. Bushehri Matam simply means 'lament' in the way of the people of Bushehr. In fact, Bushehri Matam is a ritual that is called *haya-mola* in Bushehr. Mr. Mohammadali-Pour (interviewed in Tehran, April, 2006), Mr. M. Gerashi (interviewed in Bushehr, April, 2006), and Dr. Hamidi (interviewed in Tehran April, 2006) explained the ritual of *haya-mola* to me. In this ritual, participants rhythmically beat their chests while walking in concentric circles. Each participant takes the belt of the person next to him in one hand, and beats his chest with the other hand. Participants move in circles centred around a singer who sings an emotional dirge in the memory of the Karbala tragedy.



Figure 5: Members of the Iranian diaspora from Bushehr play *damam* in Imambara Rd, Mumbai, December 2010.

The early Iranian residents in Mumbai mainly came from the southern provinces of Iran during the nineteenth century. However, another group

of migrants from the central part of Iran came to Mumbai during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were mainly peasants from small towns and villages around the cities of Yazd and Kerman, who were in exodus because of a great famine during World War I in Iran. In a short time this group was able to become financially well-established by operating catering businesses and establishing famous Irani restaurants in Mumbai. This community established another Shi'i centre, Anjuman-i Fotowat Yazdian (est. 1930), which is currently a prominent place for Shi'i rituals. Most of the descendants of the early elite traders left Mumbai, and the Iranian community became very small and dominated by Iranians who came from Yazd. The population of the community is now only a few thousand; however they remain a very influential community that manages and operates most of the Shi'i places in Dongri, in the south of Mumbai.

I asked Habib Nasser why Iranians are a very influential and well respected community in Mumbai. Habib, 37, whose father migrated to Mumbai from Bahrain during colonial times, said that 'all big places for Shi'as are built by Iranians, even the Rahmatabad cemetery was made by the Iranian people, which is the only cemetery for Shi'a Muslims in Mumbai.' Habib's father was a patron of the Muharram rituals in Mumbai and Habib himself is the founder of an *anjuman* (association) in Dongri. Habib stated that 'we are privileged to use [the cemetery] by the grace of the Iranian people. It is in fact, I can say, I am a son of Iranian people who allow us [to be] buried in that cemetery, because we don't have any other cemetery' (interviewed in Mumbai, December 2009).

As already mentioned, the procession of Ashura was stopped in Bombay during the early twentieth century, and it was mainly the Iranian community who kept the Muharram commemoration based on *majlises* (services sessions). The community organised *majlises* in Shushtari, Amin, and Namazi Imambaras, as well as in Moghul Masjid. All these places are located in Dongri, where the community used to be concentrated. Sayyed Safar-Ali Hussini narrated a vivid picture of Muharram rituals during that period. S. Safar-

Ali, born in Mumbai, is the senior member of the Hussini family, an influential family that served as patrons for the Muharram rituals in Mumbai for generations. The family owns Lucky Hotels and restaurants in Mumbai. S. Safar-Ali (interviewed April and December 2010) mentioned that the British were nice to the Iranians and gave them permission for rituals in the *imambaras*, but the procession through the streets was not allowed. Therefore during the 1930s the Iranians had a silent procession moving between the Namazi, Shushtari, and Amin Imambaras, where they held service sessions. Supporting S. Safar-Ali's narration, *The Times of India* (TOI) reports that

The Moghuls celebrated their Katal-ki-Bat at the Nemazee'a Imambara in Paxmodia Street and at the Shustry 's Imambara¹⁶ and owing to insufficient space half the crowd could not participate in the ceremonies and had to stand up on the road outside the gate. The ceremonies...and finished within half an hour, after which the participants proceeded to the Zainul Abedin's Imambara¹⁷ at Jail Road, protect' (Anon. 1930, 10)

S. Safar-Ali stated that Iranians gradually changed the silent procession into a more typical procession. A short report by TOI (Anon. 1945, 9) also notes the procession of the Iranians. S. Safar-Ali Hussaini and Dr. Jafar Najafi (both interviewed in April 2010) noted that the very early Iranian procession was started from Namazi Imambara, came to the Shushtari Imambara, then passed by Moghul Masjid and terminated at Amin Imambara (figure 6). They mentioned that this procession was small and limited to the Iranian community.

Although the Muslim and Shi'i population decreased in Bombay after the independence of India, the population expanded again because of immigration from Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, and Bihar. S. Safar-Ali (interviewed, April, 2010) pointed out that this happened particularly after the abolition of Zamindari (landlordism) in India in the 1960s, when many Shi'a *navabs* and *zamindars* came to Bombay from Lucknow. *Navabs* and *zamindars* were influential social classes

¹⁶ Shushtari Imambara.

¹⁷ Zainul Abedin's Imambara is also known as Amin Imambara.

that owned or leased and managed agricultural lands. As many interviewees explained, when the Shi'i population increased and they gained confidence, the Iranians' procession became the core driver of expansion for the Muharram processions during the 1960s and 1970s in the south of Mumbai. While Iranians initiated the procession in the south of Bombay in Dongri, it was mainly other Ithna-Ashari Shi'as who expanded the procession. S. Safar-Ali Hussini, Jafar Najafi, Habib Nasser, Fairoz Shorki, and Zahir Abbas¹⁸ emphasised that the processions expanded based on or around the initial Iranian procession or places; however, Iranians do not participate in the expanded procession, preferring to stage their own shorter processions, thus emphasising their own distinct identity. In other words, Iranians both integrated with other Shi'as at the same time as they practised their identity.



Figure 6: The route of major Shi'i processions in the south of Mumbai; the route of the Iranian procession is shown by the solid-line. (1) Mehfil-e Abol-Fazle Abbass, (2) Namazi Imambara, (3) Shushtari Imambara, (4) Iranian Masjid, (5) Amin Imambara, (6) Anjuman-I Fotowat, (7) Rahmat-abad Cemetery.

¹⁸ He is the manager of WIN TV (World Islamic Network), interviewed in December 2009 in their small office, opposite to Khoja Masjid, Mumbai.

The Iranian group also represents its separate identity in other ways. Fiaroz Shukri, a Hindustani Shi'a, emphasised that Hindustani Shi'as fast on Ashura day until 7pm. Irani Shi'as also fast, but only until 12pm (noon). The fasting on the day of Ashura is called *Fakhe Shikani (Fa'he Shi'kani)*. It is rather difficult to find out how many people participate in *Fakhe Shikani*. In fact, during my participatory observations, I did not come across anyone who was fasting on Ashura day, especially as food and drink were being served everywhere on this day. Nevertheless, many interviewees continually echoed Fiaroz's point that Iranians distinguish themselves from other Shi'as through fasting.

Hindustani Shi'as from Utter Pradesh

Shi'i rituals have developed throughout history across the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. Indian Shi'as, like other Shi'as, localised the rituals and have developed their very own symbols; the most noticeable Indian symbol is the *ta'zyeh*, the replica of Hussein's dome in the city of Karbala. As the Shi'i rituals were developed in different linguistic territories, some terms or names may have different meanings across Shi'i communities. The Arabic term *ta'zyeh* literally means mourning, so it refers to the mourning ceremonies among Arab-speaking Shi'a communities. In Iran, *ta'zyeh* refers to the passion play of Ashura by which a part of the Karbala tragedy is performed. However, the *ta'zyeh* is the symbolic dome of Hussein, which is carried through Muharram processions in India.

The *ta'zyeh* used to be commonly carried through the procession of Ashura in Mumbai during the nineteenth century; a photograph of the Muharram procession, depicting Muharram during the late nineteenth century, shows that the *ta'zyeh* was carried in Mumbai. According to several newspaper reports, the nineteenth-century procession in Mumbai was towards Moody Bandar (Moody quay) where all the *ta'zyehs* were immersed (e.g. see Anon. 1886, 3; Anon. 1888, 5). However, when Iranians revived the Muharram procession after it had been interrupted for a few decades, the processions had a new format:

the *ta'zyeh* was no longer associated with the processions. Moreover, when the main Mumbai procession in Dongri was established during the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was towards the Rahmatabad cemetery in Mazgan and not a sea-front (figure 6). Therefore, unlike other Indian cities, the *ta'zyehs* are not carried throughout the main processions in Mumbai. This description is about the ritual in Dongri, known as the heart of Mumbai's Muharram rituals. However, in some areas like Mumbra or Govandi, the *ta'zyehs* are built and carried in local processions, identifying the Hindustani Shi'a communities that are mainly from UP. It is difficult to define the Hindustani Shi'as in Mumbai, however, Hindustani Shi'as are those who are not Khojas, Bohras, or Iranians. This group is mainly from UP and is not as financially well-established as the other three communities. However, it is also rather difficult to simply limit the idea of Hindustani Shi'as to being lower-class Shi'as.



Figure 7: Taboot Procession, Bombay, late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

A major fraction of the current Shi'i population in Mumbai came from UP. Those who came during the 1960s or 1970s do not emphasize their place of origin. Interestingly, however, those Shi'as who recently arrived emphasize that they are from UP and brought the *ta'zyeh* back to some localities in Mumbai. The *ta'zyeh* is carried through the Shi'i procession in some suburbs of Mumbai, e.g. in Govandi and Mumbra. I interviewed Sayyed Baghir Razavi about the Muharram procession in Mumbra. He is a Shi'a clergyman educated in Iran, originally from Lucknow, and moved to Mumbra

about 15 years ago. He is currently the *imam-i jamat*¹⁹ of Shi'as in Mumbra. He mentioned that 'as people are mostly from UP, they are carrying the *ta'zyeh* through the procession which is towards Rati Bandar where they immerse the symbolic dome every year' (interview in December 2009, Mumbra, Mumbai). Razavi also explained that in UP, wherever there is no sea-front, people would carry the *ta'zyeh* towards a cemetery and bury it in an open field next to the cemetery, often called 'Karbala'. In fact, that is the action carried out during the Muharram ritual in Lotus Colony in Govandi. Ershad Hussein, who is the trustee of the Ajuman of Lotus Colony (est. 1968), explained that the *ta'zyehs* are carried through procession and buried in Govandi; then some people go to Dongri to participate in the main procession (Interviewed December 2009, Govandi, Mumbai).



Figure 8: The *ta'zyehs* in Lotus Colony, Govandi, Mumbai, December 2009.

Habib Nasser mentioned that 'the Ashura day is the *makhsus* of Dongri, which means there is no procession in Ashura afternoon in Mumbai but in Dongri' (December 2009, Mumbai). This signifies the importance of Dongri, since it is said that *Imam Hussaien* was martyred in the afternoon of Ashura day. While there are many local processions during the first days of Muharram in different localities in Mumbai, all Shi'as come to Dongri to participate in the procession of Ashura afternoon.

Shi'a Ithna-Asharis, in groups known as *anjumans*, participate in the procession of Ashura day from all over the city, including Shi'as from UP who come from Mumbra or Govandi. While these *anjumans* carry their *ta'zyehs* through local processions, they participate in the main procession in Dongri without the *ta'zyehs*. In other words, in local processions they signal their UP identity, but when it is time for the main procession they simply follow the Mumbai format of the procession. Indeed, while the Shi'as from UP keep practising their own custom and identity at the local level, they exercise and exhibit their solidarity with other Shi'a communities during the major event.



Figure 9: The procession of Ashura afternoon in the south of Mumbai, December 2009

Conclusion

Muharram is the time when the complex and fractal organisation of Shi'a communities in Mumbai is revealed. The Muharram rituals have always been a means by which diverse Shi'i identities are not only defined and practised but also invented and reinvented. This paper shows that there is no one Shi'i *identity* but that there are multiple Shi'i *identities*; moreover, these identities have never been a fixed idea and are constantly evolving. In fact, Mumbai as a cosmopolitan city has intensified the need for the reinvention of identities. The Muharram rituals became crucial for this process of reinvention of identities, while the constitution of Muharram rituals also simultaneously metamorphosed over time. The interaction between diverse Shi's communities, particularly during the twentieth century, has

¹⁹ The person who leads the prayer at the mosque.

been the main force shaping the constitution of Muharram rituals in Mumbai. It does not mean that Shi'a-Sunni and Muslim-Hindu encounters were not important, but I would like to argue that the internal interactions among Shi'as has been more important than past consideration of this area has noted.

This article shows that overemphasising the political reading of social dynamics leads to simplifying social encounters. In a cosmopolitan city like Mumbai, it is necessary to recognise the complex relations that constitute a fractal society. The rituals are not passive mediums that represent social relations, but rather actively constitute and reconstitute the social relations. The time and space of rituals are the landscape in which social encounters are intensified; it is an opportunity to capture complex social relations much more easily than in an everyday setting.

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