

Mourning through Simulation: Comparative Study of Muharram Mourning Symbols in India and Iran

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Abstract:

Cities and regions in the Indian subcontinent have often been described as “Mini Iran” due to their significant Shia Muslim populations. However, the ritual core of Shi’ism, particularly the mourning ceremonies of Muharram, complicates this assumption. Although the global Shia community collectively commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his companions, the cultural environments in which these communities are situated significantly shape the form and expression of these rituals. This paper examines a specific dimension of Muharram observances, namely the symbolic repertoire employed in mourning practices, and seeks to identify differences between the subcontinental and Middle Eastern contexts through ethnographic observation and symbolic analysis. It further undertakes an epistemological inquiry into the causes of these differences, arguing that variations in ritual expression are shaped not only by spatial distance but also by processes of cultural translation, historical memory, and local incorporation. Finally, the paper reflects on the broader social implications of these symbolic divergences within the communities in which they emerge and continue to be practiced.

Keywords: Shi’ism, Muharram, Indian subcontinent, Hussain, ritual symbolism.

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Introduction

The presence of culturally shared practices is a strong factor which binds communities together. Cultures of all kinds act as social adhesives through which the social tension is managed, distributed and used for productivity. A broad classification of cultures can be into three types: everyday cultures, celebratory cultures and mourning cultures. There is another kind which can be accommodated in the category of everyday cultures, and that is fear-based cultures, where certain rites and activities are performed on the occasions of natural disasters or out of fear of spirits and ghosts in certain parts of the world.

Mourning cultures are solemn and serious wherever they are performed. There are general mourning cultures which are followed the natural deaths of people in the community. Then, there are cultures of particular or special mourning, where mourning fulfils more than one function, and it becomes a base to achieve a higher goal or emotion. These comprise mourning of martyrs, or victims of disasters, war commemorations and mourning of reputed personalities or leaders. In general mourning, for example in Greece, the rituals are solemn and more silent in their expression, like “Visitors often bring a small bunch of flowers and place them on the open coffin and kiss the head of the deceased. Mothers and widows will wear all black for 40 days. Close male relatives do not shave for 40 days.” (Gallery Collection) The special mourning, though, becomes more performative and visible as it is working towards a greater, and often collective goal. A commemoration ceremony is usually planned and announced many days earlier, and when performed, it is attended by important dignitaries as well as the common folk. The commemoration ceremony is an event. It is not an act. It wields power beyond its immediate essence, and this can be observed in events like the commemoration of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination. When one reads in the PTI report, “Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday

(January 30, 2026) paid tributes to Mahatma Gandhi on his death anniversary”, it makes one think of the power and importance of such events. The event reflects the power of mourning as the Prime Minister’s act of paying homage to Gandhi on his death anniversary goes against the general sentiment of many supporters, and even some members, of his party about Gandhi. For example, “Sakshi Maharaj, a BJP MP from the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, described Gandhi’s assassin Nathuram Godse as a ‘patriot’” (Joshi). John Soboslai has noted that “the structure of martyrdom exerts extraordinary power due to its spectacular demonstration of a commitment that extends into the grave, where every martyr’s road leads.” So, mourning cultures have a subversive effect on political narratives which are pitched in opposition to a leader who was martyred and is remembered regularly on his birth anniversary, death anniversary and is printed on the national currency, which becomes a mnemonic product of his memory.

The mourning culture of Muharram is distinct in this series of mourning cultures. It not only relies on an elaborate literary institution of *majlis* lectures, and oral poetry in the form of *qasida*, *soz*, *salaam*, and written poetry in the form of *marsiyyas*, but also uses visuals like paintings, symbols, flags, banners and the modern trends have also incorporated films, VR headset walk-throughs, and animations. The mourning symbols are an important part of this culture.

Since 2015, a lot of discussion has happened on the issue of transcontinental Shia identity in the sense that Shias relate with each other wherever they are through clerical linkages and diaspora. However, this analysis prioritises clerical leadership more than the general emotional linkages of the community, which is based on the collective trauma of the tragedy of Karbala. Even before the Iranian revolution of 1979, Shia communities in India, Pakistan, Iraq and Iran

communicated with each other and took part in each other's Muharram mourning ceremonies. Scholars, poets and poetry performing groups, called *Anjuman's*, travelled beyond borders to form this borderless connection of emotion.

This often makes people think that perhaps the institution of Muharram mourning is monolithic and linear in nature without regional, linguistic or national distinctions. However, this is far from fact, and this research attempts to answer this same concern. Focusing primarily on the differences between mourning symbols in India and Iran, this research attempts to look at this phenomenon of change or variation in mourning culture from the Baudrillardian lens of *Simulacra and Simulation*. The effect of these symbols, in relation to their social value, historical connection and mnemonic status, is observed, linked to how the participants respond differently to these symbols, and seeks an answer to the question as to whether this difference results from a difference in the interpretation of the tragedy itself.

Muharram Mourning Symbols: A Comparative Study of India and Iran

The Shia community, in addition to its historical roots in Iran and Iraq, has its largest concentration in the Indian subcontinent, particularly in Northern India and Pakistan. As Wolf notes, "The community forms 10-15 per cent of the total 25 per cent of the Muslim population of the Indian subcontinent" (81). Having migrated from Iran, Iraq, and other parts of the Middle East during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these communities brought with them a rich cultural heritage, including distinctive forms of dress, cuisine, as well as important religious ceremonies and rituals. However, as Chelkowski argues, communities that have migrated from their places of origin and settled in new cultural environments have inevitably been influenced by local traditions. He observes that "believers closest to Karbala follow the original rites, while

adherents at a greater distance from Iran have incorporated the influence of other cultures into their observances" (161).

A significant disparity exists between India and Iran in the symbols employed during Muharram to commemorate and revive the ethos of the tragedy of Karbala. In Iran, the symbolic repertoire emphasizes an aesthetic and performance-oriented approach to mourning. Symbols such as the Tuq (also spelled Tauq or Tawq), the *Nakhl*, and the ritual elements incorporated into Tazieh (or Shabeeh) performances occupy a central place in commemorative practices. In contrast, the symbolic tradition in India is more extensive and diverse. These symbols do not function collectively as components or props within a single overarching ritual; rather, they appear independently across different mourning ceremonies. Although the symbols are not structurally interconnected, the *Alam* typically assumes a leading role and precedes the other symbols in Muharram processions.



Figure 1 - Iranian men carrying the Alam in a procession

We begin our comparative analysis by examining the differences between the Iranian and Indian variants of the *alam*. As shown in Fig. 1 (Jafarnehzad), the Iranian *alam*, also known as the Tuq, Parcham, *Alamat*, or *Tauq*, is distinguished by its multiple metal finials. These finials are referred to as *Punja* or *Panjeh* in both the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. The Middle Eastern *alam* also incorporates numerous small flags bearing the names of the martyrs of Karbala. These flags are attached to a horizontal bar, typically with one *Punja* accompanying each name flag, although this proportion may vary. Each *Punja* is further adorned with feathers, which bear a symbolic association with the *Toupha*. In his discussion of the identity of a Byzantine rider depicted in a Renaissance drawing, Lehmann describes the *Toupha* as "the legendary Toupha, the helmet crested with feathers" (42). Accordingly, the feathers attached to the *alam* evoke the feathered crests of the *Touphas* worn by Husayn and his companions. In this symbolic framework, the flag of the *alam* is sometimes understood to represent the body of a martyr, while the *Punja* occupies the position of either the martyr's head or the raised hand.



Figure 2 - Alams of the Subcontinent

The subcontinental alam is different based on structure. Although the alams in the subcontinent are of so much variety that standardisation of their structure is a highly complicated task. As observed in Fig. 2 (Raza), the alams made in the subcontinent have five major components. The first and the basic one is the staff or *Chardh*. The *Chardh* is made of wood, iron or more recently of PVC pipe. The next component is *Pharaira*, or the flag cloth, by which the whole staff is covered. The third component is the *Patka*. It is the face of the alam. A pentagonal, heavy and stiff cloth is used for the *Patka*. A *Patka* is usually marked with calligraphic names of Hussain or his half-brother Abbas, along with the image of the horse of Hussain. It is the part of the alam that the mourners aspire to kiss or touch when an alam is presented in a mourning ceremony. The fourth part is *Punja* in the subcontinental alam as well. Usually, in the subcontinental alam, the size of the *Punja* is always smaller in length than the rest of the alam, while in the Middle East, the huge *Punja* attached to the *tuq* often is bulkier and higher than the rest of the body. The last part is the *Mashk*, or the waterbag hung by the head of the alam, usually made of cloth or steel in the form of a small bag or purse. (Fig.2) According to popular narrations of the tragedy of Karbala in Muqarram's *Maqtal al-Husayn* (n.d), when Abbas came to Hussain to seek permission for the battlefield. "Hussain ordered him to bring water for the children, so Abbas went to those people and admonished them, warning them of the Wrath of the Omnipotent, but all of that fell on deaf ears" (467). Then, it is mentioned in continuation that "he rode his horse and took the water bag. As many as four thousand archers soon surrounded him and shot him with their arrows, yet their large number did not impede his attempt." (468)

Thus, the alam, unlike in the Middle East, where alam may be attributed to any martyr, with the attachment of *Mashk* to it has been solely dedicated to Abbas ibn' Ali in the subcontinent. Be it in the Middle East or the Subcontinent, the alam has taken the place of a flag,

which becomes an emblem of identity, for the Shia community in this case, as has been mentioned by Zamyatin in his piece entitled, *The role of flags and emblems in Irish commemorations*,

One of the most fundamental needs that all humans have is for a sense of identity or belonging. A strong feature of this is the human attachment to flags. It is undeniable that flags play a very important role in encouraging a sense of pride amongst people, as they provide a real and tangible sense of identity. They serve as symbols for people to recognise and unite under, based on shared beliefs and values. (Zamyatin 36)

There is another set of symbols that do sound similar but are miles apart. The *Tazieh* or *Shabeeh* has two very different meanings in both variants of mourning. The *Tazieh* stands for plays or enactments held on open roads or in theatres in the Middle East, while it stands for the replicas of Hussain's shrine made out of paper and wood in the Subcontinent. The reason for this divide is not known and open to further research, but it is estimated that the need for a replica probably arose from the unavailability of the real shrine in India. The majority of the Shia in India and other surrounding regions were not rich, and even during the rule of the Nawabs of Oudh, travel to the Middle East was not easy. There is still a link between the performance and the object.

Tazieh means to console or to pay homage to a dead person, while *Shabeeh* means creating a replica of something extant. As seen in Fig. 3 (Linet) and Fig. 4 (Linet), the organisers of the play depict the scenes of Karbala by setting up tents, dressing up characters like the soldiers of Hussain's and Yazid's army, showing duels as they took place in Karbala and the martyrdom and post-martyrdom scenes. The tents are burnt for real on the streets to depict the scene of the evening of Ashura, when the tents of the women and children who came with Hussain were set

on fire. This whole enactment is a series of *Shabeeh* of events of Karbala which evokes *Taziehor* homage from the audience. (Taste Iran)



Figure 3 - Re-enactment of the burning tents of Karbala in a Tazieh play



Figure 4 - A scene of a duel during a Tazieh play

Masselos (as cited in Nakash) traces the arrival of the *Shabeeh* in India to the late 1820s, when a group of Shias from Iran settled in Mumbai. However, he also observes that "it is unclear whether it developed at all into a real play on stage" (173). Referring to Bihar and Bengal, Tennant (as cited in Nakash) notes that "the *Shabeeh* in Bengal and Bihar in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century took the form of public processions" (174). One possible explanation for the fading of the performative identity of the *Tazieh* or *Shabeeh* in the Indian subcontinent is the absence of scripts and institutional training available to local communities. There were no seminaries or libraries to sustain the dramatic tradition, and the Qur'an remained the principal religious text accessible to the wider population. Even written accounts of the tragedy of Karbala were not widely available. It was only in 1732 that Fazli produced *Dah Majlis*, regarded as the first specimen of Urdu prose, which Saksena describes as "a translation of a Persian book entitled *Rauzat-ush-Shauhda* or 'The Garden of the Martyrs'" (240).

Another possible explanation for the replacement of theatrical performance with symbolic simulacra in the subcontinent is offered by Cole (as cited in Nakash), who argues that "the existence there of ample Hindu-style theatrical plays preempted the spread of the Tazi'ya play to that part of the Shi'a world" (174). This explanation, however, is open to question. Sax notes that the Ramnagar *Ramlila* of Varanasi "developed its present form sometime in the early to mid-nineteenth century" (130), suggesting that its mature form emerged after the period under discussion. Moreover, both the *Tazieh* plays and the *Ramlila* have been linked to the Christian Corpus Christi processions or medieval European Corpus Christi plays by Nakash (170) and Sax (130). Neither scholar, however, regards this theory as conclusive, and both acknowledge alternative explanations for the emergence of these performance traditions.

The *Tazi'ya* in India receives literary attention in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*: “Muharram was approaching, and as usual the Chandrapore Mohammedans were building paper towers of a size too large to pass under the branches of a certain Pepal tree” (93). It is noteworthy that Forster refers to the *Tazi'ya* three additional times in the novel, consistently describing it as “paper towers,” except on one occasion when he quotes Aziz asking Fielding, “shall we cut the Tazi'ya short or shall we carry it another route ... where the English sneer at our skins?” (114). Several important observations may be drawn from Forster's account. First, the *Tazi'ya* appears to have been the central symbol of Muharram commemorations. Second, it seems to have enjoyed widespread acceptance among Indian Muslims. Third, it was evidently the tallest ceremonial object carried in Muharram processions.

Although the *Tazi'ya* is almost universally described as a replica or simulacrum of the shrine of Husayn at Karbala, its form does not closely reproduce the architecture of the original shrine. Instead, it has evolved into a distinctive architectural structure of its own. As illustrated in Fig. 5 (Raza), the *Tazi'ya* is constructed in a series of stacked sections or blocks. The structure rests upon a broad square or rectangular base made of bamboo and paper, known as the *Takht*. This base is considerably sturdier than the upper portions of the structure, as it bears the weight of the entire *Tazi'ya*. Above the *Takht* rise one or more blocks of progressively diminishing size. *Tazi'yas* intended for domestic observance during Muharram are generally constructed with a single block, whereas those displayed in processions or installed in *Imambaras* and *Hussainiyas* typically consist of multiple tiers. Permanent *Tazi'yas* housed in *Hussainiyas* or local *Karbals* are often constructed from steel or glass, as they remain in place throughout the year rather than being ceremonially buried or dismantled.

Each tier contains niches or arched openings through which the interior of the *Tazi'ya* is visible. The different sections are separated by decorative paper bands that define the structure's divisions. Affixed to one of these bands are two small, colourful paper rolls placed together to represent the *Turbat*, or the symbolic grave within the shrine. The niches and doorways are carefully aligned so that the *Turbat* remains visible at the centre of the structure. The entire construction is crowned by a dome made of bamboo and paper. Some *Tazi'yas* also incorporate corner pillars or columns, which appear to imitate the minarets of the shrine at Karbala.

The reception of the *Tazi'ya* within the Indian context has traditionally been marked by deep reverence. Its construction and the processions in which it is carried have historically been inclusive communal practices. As Arshad Alam observes:

It is worth mentioning that the making of *Tazi'yas* and carrying them in procession has been an age-old tradition, not only in Mubarakpur but across South Asia. *Tazi'ya*-making provided one occasion where religious boundaries were blurred as Hindu residents of Mubarakpur participated as well and were equally enthusiastic about carrying it in *Juloos* (procession). *Mohallas* vied with each other for the best produced *Tazi'yas* in the spirit of neighbourhood competition. Moreover, in earlier times, Hindu women performed certain ritual prayers at the *Tazi'yas* that were placed on different *Imambaras* (a raised platform on which *Tazi'yas* are kept) as their way of showing devotion. (Alam 61)

When the *Tazi'yas* are taken out in procession on the Day of Ashura, they are often shrouded. In this context, the *Tazi'ya* is perceived less as a replica of the shrine of Husayn and more as a symbolic embodiment of Husayn himself. During the *majlis* held over the first nine days of Muharram, the speaker frequently draws attention to the number of days remaining until Ashura

and emphasizes that, after the Day of Ashura, the *Azakhana* (the hall or designated space in a house or separate building where *majlis* are held) will become *veeraan* (deserted or abandoned). As discussed earlier, the terms *Tazieh* and *Shabeeh* are closely related in the Middle Eastern tradition, and a similar relationship exists in the Indian subcontinent. In the subcontinental context, the *Tazi'ya* is also referred to as a *Shabeeh*. However, it is not the only *Shabeeh* that evokes grief (*ta'ziya*) among mourners. Rather, the term *Shabeeh* extends to almost all the symbolic objects associated with Muharram mourning in the subcontinent. There is, however, an important distinction between the performative and symbolic uses of *Shabeeh*. In the *Tazieh* play, the replica setting or *Shabeeh* of persons and objects does not, by itself, evoke an emotional response; instead, it is the actors' performance within that setting that generates grief. By contrast, in the subcontinental *Tazi'ya*, it is the *Shabeeh* of the shrine itself that functions as the primary object of devotion and mourning, eliciting grief directly from the participants.



Figure 5 - A Tazi'ya

Another symbol from the Iranian tradition of Muharram rituals that finds a distant parallel in the mourning practices of the Indian subcontinent is the *Nakhl*. The *Nakhl* may be understood as combining characteristics of the subcontinental *Tazi'ya* and the *Tabut*. It symbolically represents the bier carrying the body of Husayn, borne by his followers through the streets and towns before the enactment of the *Tazieh* drama. As illustrated in Fig. 6, the *Nakhl* can be monumental in size and, in such cases, requires a larger number of bearers than any other mourning symbol found in either Iran or the Indian subcontinent. Chelkowski explicitly draws a comparison between the *Nakhl* and the subcontinental *Tazi'ya*, emphasizing their close symbolic relationship (156). Commenting on the significance and reception of the *Nakhl*, he writes:

The *Nakhl* is an artistic representation of the improvised stretcher on which the body of Imam Hussain was carried from the place of his martyrdom to his tomb and is the direct antecedent of the Caribbean *Tadja* as well. In English, *Nakhl* is translated as "date palm." Many Shiites believe that Hussein's body was moved to the shade of a palm tree; hence his bier is called *Nakhl*... In addition to its religious significance, a *Nakhl* is a symbol of pride and social unity for a town, village, or district. They are found in places of honour in town squares or in and around a *Takiyeh*, the structure built to stage the *Ta'ziyeh*. (Chelkowski 157)



Figure 6 - A crowd of mourners carrying a Nakhl

It is worth noting that, although the *Nakhl* closely resembles the subcontinental *Tazi'ya* in its construction, mode of carriage, processional display, and monumental scale, its symbolic function corresponds more closely to that of the *Tabut*. The size of the *Nakhl* often serves as an indicator of the socio-economic standing of the sponsoring family or procession organizers, as well as of the historical prestige and legacy of the procession itself. The *Nakhls* of Yazd are particularly renowned, and processions there often feature multiple *Nakhls* of varying sizes. (SalamMasoomeen)



Figure 7 - A Tabut

The subcontinental symbol of the *Tabut* derives its significance from the fact that, whereas the *Tazi'ya* is primarily associated with Husayn and his shrine, and the *Alam* is linked with his half-brother Abbas, the *Tabut* serves as the principal symbol representing the remaining martyrs of Karbala. In certain regional traditions, however, the *Tabut* is also associated directly with Husayn. Its primary function is to represent the bier of a martyr, and it is carried in procession in the same manner as a deceased person is borne during funeral rites. Describing the *Tabut* processions in Mumbai, Eisenlohr observes: Local neighbourhood strongmen and plebeian leaders or *dada* controlled the rituals and processions surrounding the making and carrying around of *Tabut* (elaborately decorated representations of Hussain's bier or tomb) that were the central element of the festivities of Muharram in the final decades of the nineteenth century. (693)

Eisenlohr's interpretation of the *Tabut* appears problematic because he equates the bier with the tomb. This conflation suggests one of two possibilities. Either the structure he observed

was not a *Tabut* but a *Nakhl*, as his emphasis on its organised construction implies a structure substantially larger than a bier, or it was indeed a *Tabut*, but he was misinformed in identifying it as a replica of Husayn's tomb or shrine. Well-known *Tabut* processions in northern India include the *Bahattar Tabut* (Seventy-two *Tabuts*) and the *Aththarah Bani Hashim* (Eighteen *Tabuts* representing members of Husayn's family), both held in Kanpur.

These processions generally follow a predetermined route announced in advance by a designated caller or herald. Mourners line both sides of the route, waiting to kiss the *Tabut* and pay their respects as it passes before them. The reception of the *Tabut* is marked by profound grief. When the procession concludes at a house or an *Imambada*, groups of young mourners often gather around the *Tabut* to perform *matam* (ritual chest-beating). Following the *majlis*, some mourners place their heads upon the frame of the *Tabut* while lamenting the sufferings of Husayn and his companions.

As illustrated in Fig. 7 (Raza), a *Tabut* generally consists of three principal components: a wooden or steel frame, layers of white cloth, often stained with red paint to evoke bloodstains, and a turban placed at the head of the bier. Frequently, a pair of small *Alams* or simply two *Punjas* appear on the sides of the turban. The ladies often donate covering cloths and floral garlands for the *Tabut* when it passes by their houses. This donation of cloth for covering the *Tabut* is similar to the ritual of *chadar* as practised in dargahs. (Ghosh 185)

The horse of Karbala is among the most frequently represented motifs associated with the tragedy of Karbala, particularly in visual art. According to accounts of the battle, after Husayn was martyred by the forces of Yazid, his horse killed forty enemy soldiers and ten horses. It then found an opportunity to smear its forehead with Husayn's blood before returning to the tents

where the women and children awaited on the plains of Karbala (Muqarram 492). The poignant moment in which the wounded, blood-stained, and riderless horse, with its saddle hanging loose, returns to the tents has been immortalized in Mahmoud Farshchian's celebrated painting *The Evening of Ashura* (Fig. 8) (Khamenei). The horse of Husayn also appears prominently in the paintings of M. F. Husain (Fig. 9), whose artistic imagination was profoundly shaped by the tragedy of Karbala. Although Husain drew inspiration for his equine imagery from multiple sources, "the earliest icon that he had a part in creating was the apocalyptic horse of the Tazi'yas" (Bartholomew et al., as cited in Nair). While the horse of Karbala serves as a shared source of artistic inspiration in both the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, the ways in which it is ritually and materially represented in the two traditions differ significantly.



Figure 8 - Mahmud Farshchian's Masterpiece depicting the sorrowful event of Ashura



Figure 9 - Sprinkling Horses by M.F. Husain

There is, in general, no separate symbolic existence of the *Zuljanah* (the name of Husayn's horse) within the Iranian tradition of Muharram mourning. Even in Farshchian's *The Evening of Ashura*, although the horse occupies the central position in the composition, the emotional force of the painting does not derive from the horse as an independent object of veneration. Rather, the riderless horse, its saddle hanging loose and its body stained with blood, surrounded by grieving women and children, signifies the martyrdom of its master. Thus, Farshchian evokes grief through the horse without elevating it into the primary object of devotion (Khamenei). By contrast, M. F. Husain renders the image of the horse comparatively autonomous and self-sufficient (autotelic), allowing it to function as a symbolic subject in its own right (Nair). The same distinction that characterizes the artistic representations of Farshchian and Husain is also reflected in the ritual practices and *Shabeeh* traditions of Iran and the Indian subcontinent.

In the Indian subcontinent, the *Zuljanah* is a highly decorated and deeply venerated ritual symbol, as illustrated in Fig. 10 (Raza). At its simplest, the *Zuljanah* is prepared by draping a large white caparison over the horse from its neck to its back, with red paint applied to symbolize blood. More elaborate representations incorporate a green caparison, a saddle, a shield, a

sheathed sword, a small ceremonial umbrella above the saddle, bells fastened to the hooves, a *Toupha*, a chest guard, and additional red paint on the body and hooves. Among the animal symbols associated with Muharram, the *Zuljanah* is the most widely replicated throughout the Indian subcontinent. It is almost always featured in public processions and is only rarely taken inside private homes or *Imambaras* (Mansingh A. & Mansingh L. 27).

The *Zuljanah* ordinarily proceeds near the front of the procession and is accompanied by its handler, who walks beside it holding its reins to keep the animal calm. Along the procession route, households of mourners frequently offer the *Zuljanah* water and food, roasted gram being the most common offering. Women typically take the lead in this act of feeding, as many of the men are engaged in the procession itself. The ritual feeding of the riderless horse becomes an occasion for expressing grief and is often accompanied by lamentation and wailing on the part of the women performing the offering. Symbolically, this scene recalls Farshchian's *The Evening of Ashura*, in which the riderless horse returns to a space inhabited only by women and children. The ritual is also marked by the participation of Hindu women in many localities, reflecting the broader communal character of Muharram observances in parts of the subcontinent. Throughout the procession, the *Zuljanah* is treated with exceptional reverence: it is neither struck nor whipped, and no one mounts it, even after its ceremonial trappings have been removed, at least for the duration of Ashura.



Figure 10 - A Zuljanah

The *Zuljanah*, in this sense, differs significantly from the horse of Husayn as represented in *Tazieh* performances. In these dramatic enactments, the horse is typically ridden by an actor portraying Husayn. Although the horse remains visually prominent and attracts attention on stage, the affective force of grief is generated primarily through the enacted narrative rather than through the horse itself. Moreover, unlike the subcontinental *Zuljanah*, the theatrical horse in the *Tazieh* tradition is not adorned with symbolic accessories. It appears, apart from its rider, as an ordinary riding horse, without any additional ritual embellishment.

A symbol comparable to the *Zuljanah* in its ritual and affective function is the *Amaari*. The *Amaari* consists of two principal components: a camel and a curtained litter or box, known

as the *mehmil*, in which women historically travelled during caravan journeys. According to tradition, the women and children of Husayn and his martyred companions were left behind after Husayn's martyrdom, exposed to the mercy of their enemies. Subsequently, the forces of Yazid trampled the bodies of Husayn and his companions with horses, attacked the tents of the women and children, and looted their belongings before setting the tents on fire. As described in a widely cited account, "Scarves were snatched, rings were pulled out of fingers, earrings were taken out, and so were ankle-rings" (Nama, as cited in Muqarram 521). One of the frequently recited narratives illustrating the suffering of the children is as follows:

Another approached Fatima, the daughter of Husayn, and took her ankle-rings out. He was crying. "What is the matter with you?" she asked him. "How can I help crying," he answered, "since I am looting the daughter of the Messenger of Allah?" She asked him to leave her alone. He said, "I am afraid if I do not take it, someone else will." (Tawus & Nama, as cited in Muqarram 521)

On the following day, Ali, the young son of Husayn who had survived along with the women, was made to ride unsaddled camels that lacked any *mehmil* (Muqarram 530). The *Amaari*, therefore, signifies the cumulative suffering and deprivation endured by the women and children left after the tragedy of Karbala. The presence of the *mehmil*, as depicted in Fig. 11 (Jagran), despite the historical fact that it was not available to Husayn's household in the aftermath of Karbala, may be explained in two ways. First, it reflects the reverence accorded to the women of Husayn's household in the devotional imagination of mourners, to the extent that representing their travel without a *mehmil* is considered inappropriate even within ritual mourning contexts.



Figure 11 - A man holding the reins of an Amaari

For similar reasons, in *Tazieh* performances, female figures are never depicted as bareheaded or without a scarf. Another explanation for the inclusion of the *mehmil* in the subcontinental *Amaari* tradition is the relative lack of alternative decorative elements for adorning the camels. However, the presence of the *mehmil* does not diminish the emotional intensity of mourning. Instead, it functions as a contrastive image, evoking the manner in which the women are believed to have originally arrived in Karbala. In this sense, the *mehmil* also highlights its own absence in the post-Karbala narrative, thereby reinforcing the sense of loss experienced by mourners. In keeping with ritual propriety, no member of the mourning community is permitted to ride the camel during the procession.



Figure 12 - Iranian children riding camels during the Muharram procession

This practice is reversed in the Iranian context, as observed in Fig. 12, where participants, particularly children dressed in black, ride camels bearing banners and flags and weep as they move through marketplaces. In these processions, the camels are also elaborately decorated. Thus, the pattern of animal adornment in the *Amaari* tradition appears inverted between the two regions: whereas the Indian subcontinent emphasizes a comparatively restrained camel with the *mehmil* as its primary symbolic element, the Iranian version features more extensively decorated camels.

The *Gehwara* or *Jhoola* (cradle) is another comparable symbol that functions differently in the Middle Eastern and subcontinental traditions to evoke mourning. The *Gehwara* seeks to elicit grief by recalling the infant son of Husayn, who was killed by an arrow while in his

father's lap. According to historical accounts cited in various sources, "Hurmalah Ibn Kahil al-Asadi, a vicious Arab, shot the infant with an arrow that slaughtered him" (Muqarram 477).

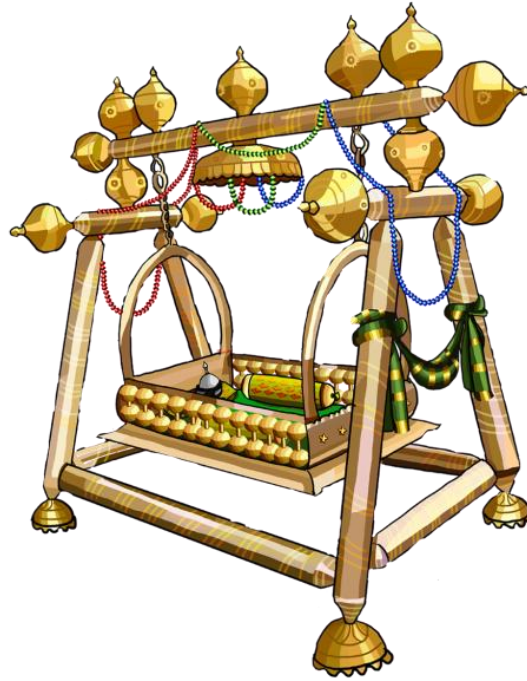


Figure 13 - A Gehwara

As Mervin notes, several symbols, such as the turban (used in place of Husayn's head) and the "cradle of his son, the 'infant,'" function as "representations, images and symbols rooted in Iranian culture [that] were disseminated in the Shi'i world, spreading this culture that later on became locally integrated, either accepted in its original form or reappropriated and transformed" (517). In the Indian subcontinent, the *Gehwara* is typically carried in processions on the fourth, ninth, or tenth of Muharram. In most cases, only one *Gehwara* generally one associated with a particular lineage or commemorative significance—is taken out in procession, while other households keep decorated *Gehwaras* within their homes alongside the *Tazi'ya* throughout the first nine days of Muharram. Finally, on the tenth day, after the *Tazi'ya* has been buried, these

domestic *Gehwaras* are dismantled. The *Gehwara*, as depicted in Fig. 13 (Raza), is typically constructed from wood, although steel variants have become increasingly common due to their durability and reduced vulnerability to decay and termite damage. The structure is usually padded with pillows and cushions for decorative and symbolic comfort. Green and red fabrics are most frequently used as coverings.



Figure 14 - An Iranian child lying in the replica cradle of Ali Asghar

Structurally, the Iranian cradle tradition and the subcontinental *Gehwara* are broadly similar. However, a significant ritual distinction lies in their usage: in the Indian subcontinent, no child or infant is physically placed in the *Gehwara*, whereas in the Iranian tradition, symbolic representations of the cradle of Ali Asghar may include the placement of a child, as illustrated in Fig. 14 (Zelazowsky). This difference points to distinct forms of ritual embodiment and symbolic practice across the two regions.

Conclusion

The preceding observations suggest that the opacity of mourning symbols is greater in the Indian subcontinent than in Iran during Muharram. This raises an important question of causation: what produces this difference between relatively opaque, autotelic symbols in India and comparatively more translucent symbolic forms in Iran?

Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and simulacra offers a useful framework for understanding this distinction. As he notes, "To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have," and "simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (3). Read alongside Chelkowski's observation that Muharram practices remain closer to the original rites nearer Karbala, this theoretical lens provides a way to read Muharram symbols not as fixed religious objects, but as evolving cultural forms shaped by historical displacement and local interpretation. Within this framework, the historical development of Muharram practices in South Asia can be understood as a process of cultural translation rather than simple transmission. As Baudrillard further argues, "When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (8). In this sense, opacity is produced as much by temporal loss as by spatial separation.

This disruption of space and time generates a sense of absence, and it is this absence that produces the need for simulation. With the movement of merchants, rulers, ministers, clerics, scholars, and craftsmen into the Indian subcontinent during the Mughal period, cultural practices of mourning were also relocated and reconfigured. The Nawabs, in particular, appear to have encouraged forms of commemoration that were not strictly confined to doctrinal expression but were instead capable of resonating more broadly, prompting reflection on the question: who is

Husayn? Although Muharram commemorations existed in India prior to the Nawabi period, these elites contributed significantly to the consolidation and visibility of mourning practices.

This process of reinterpretation becomes most visible when individual symbols are examined comparatively across regions. In comparative terms, the *Alam* in India and Iran may appear structurally similar, as both reference the standard of Husayn's army. However, in the Indian context, its emotional resonance is often intensified through the incorporation of the *mashk*, which enables broader affective recognition across communities.

Among these symbols, the *Tazi'ya* provides the clearest example of gradual formal and spatial transformation. Over time, the Indian *Tazi'ya* incorporated elements of local architectural idioms, evolving into a distinctive form resembling a tower with a dome. The shrine at Karbala, by contrast, differs significantly in form. Within this framework, the *Tazi'ya* can be understood as a simulacrum that no longer merely represents the shrine but produces its own autonomous symbolic reality. As Baudrillard writes, "Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum" (6).

A similar logic of absence and symbolic reconstruction also governs other ritual objects in the subcontinent. The *Tabut* and *Gehwara* function as nostalgic references to what was not materially present at Karbala, and this absence becomes the condition of their presence in collective memory. The separation of the infant from his cradle, or the absence of a prepared bier for Husayn, constitutes a form of collective affective trauma intensified by spatial and temporal distance from Karbala.

In addition to architectural and object-based symbols, animal figures further extend this symbolic economy into the domain of embodied affect. The *Zuljanah* and *Amaari* not only function as mourning symbols but also enhance the visibility and emotional intensity of processions, particularly for non-Shia onlookers. The presence of the horse, in particular, generates interpretive engagement by crossing the boundary between human ritual and animal embodiment, producing a transcendental symbolic register.

Taken together, these variations suggest that Muharram rituals operate differently depending on the cultural and demographic contexts in which they are embedded. In Iran, the relative homogeneity of the Shia population reduces the need for symbolic opacity as a means of outreach, while encouraging interpretive elaboration within a more continuous devotional framework. In the Indian subcontinent, by contrast, symbolic opacity becomes a key mechanism of engagement across communities, encouraging inquiry, participation, and affective response as symbols circulate through diverse social spaces.

It may therefore be concluded that simulation intensifies as distance from the original increases, generating expanded affective and interpretive possibilities within mourning rituals. In this sense, distance from Karbala does not diminish mourning; rather, it reorganizes its symbolic intensity through simulation, reinterpretation, and affective expansion.

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Annexure:**I**

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