The first time I saw the Bībī kā ᑳalam was on a warm February afternoon in 2005 (Fig. 1). It was the beginning of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar when the Shiʿa remember and mourn the martyrdom of the third Imam, Husain, who, along with seventy-two of his supporters was killed in the Iraqi desert at a place called Karbala in 680 CE. I joined my colleague, Urdu scholar Amy Bard and two Hyderabadi women, Dr. Zakia Sultana, a geography professor at a local women’s college and prominent majlis orator (zākirah), and Dr. Shemeem, a leader of Yadgar-e Husaini, the women-only āshūrkhanah (a ritual space discussed below), located in Purani Haveli, a Shiʿi neighborhood in Hyderabad’s Old City. Riding around in a pair of autorickshaws, we spent an afternoon visiting the many public and private āshūrkhanahs in the Old City, where we paid our respects to these sacred objects.

We stopped in a narrow street outside a building concealed behind plain white walls, typical of much of the traditional architecture in the Old City. Walking through the gate,
we entered into a large courtyard, bustling with activity. We had crossed a threshold where the dusty street with its honking horns and crowds of people gave way to a different sort of activity. People come from near and far to seek the intercession of Bibi Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, wife of Imam ʿAli, and mother of the martyred Imam Husain. Men and women gathered around the alāvā, a large firepit, where for most of the days of Muharram, offerings of incense are made as a votive offering, part of prayers of supplication offered to Fatimah al-Zahra seeking her intercession (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Incense offerings at the Bibi kā Alāvā, Hyderabad. Photo by author, 2006.

In Hyderabad, the capital of the southern state of Telangana with a booming population of more than ten million, the city’s Shiʿi population is but a fraction of the total, estimated in 2017 to be approximately 200,000. Hyderabad was founded in 1591 by Muhammad Quli (r. 1580–1612), the fifth sultan of the Qutb Shahi dynasty (r. ca. 1496–1687). Since the late-sixteenth century, when Muharram rituals came to be sponsored by the Qutb Shahi state, Muhammad Quli and his successor, the seventh sultan ʿAbdullah (r. 1626–1672) innovated architectural spaces for holding rituals, as well as new material and visual practices that allowed Imam Husain and his family to be absorbed into and appeal to diverse religious constituencies.
Since the sixteenth century, the ‘alam has been the religious symbol par excellence for the Hyderabadi Shi’a. In Hyderabad, Shi’i religious life constellates around the ‘āshūrkhānah (“the house of the tenth”), a ritual space where mourning assemblies are held and ‘alams are raised during Muharram for devotees to venerate and seek their intercession. ‘Alams are made in all shapes, sizes, and designs. Some may be only a few inches in height and weigh mere ounces, while others may weigh dozens of pounds and be more than ten feet tall. ‘Alam design varies significantly between the major Shi’i centers of Hyderabad, Lucknow, Lahore and Karachi, where their material composition, size, and the individuals they represent reflect the particularities of Shi’i cultural memory. A popular ‘alam design found throughout the subcontinent is in the shape of an outstretched hand, known as a panjah, which variously represents Imam ‘Ali or Imam Husain’s half-brother ‘Abbas ibn ‘Ali, who is revered for his valiant attempt to collect water in a water-skin (mashk) at the banks of the Euphrates river, where soldiers from the ‘Umayyad caliph’s army severed each of his hands before ultimately decapitating him. Panjahs representing ‘Abbas often have a mashk on a chain suspended from the top of the ‘alam. ‘Alams are more than material representations of the individual that the object signifies; for South Asian Shi’a the ‘alam is an embodiment of the Imam or member of the Ahl-e Bait (the family of the Prophet Muhammad) that it represents. The ‘alam is a materialization of the presence in absence of the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, with whom the Shi’a can visually interact, to whom they can make supplicatory offerings and vows, and whose intercession can be sought. The ‘alam establishes an immediacy between object and devotee that precludes referring to an ‘alam as “it.” The Bībī kā ‘alam is a materialized embodiment of Fatimah, if only for the ten-day ritual period of Muharram, and she receives and reciprocates the devotional gaze of devotees, both Shi’a and non-Shi’a, who seek her intercession in solving problems of health, marriage, family, education, and work.

The ‘alam displayed at the Bībī kā Alavā ‘āshūrkhānah is one of the most beloved by the Hyderabadi Shi’a. Embedded in the ‘alam is a piece of the wooden plank on which Fatimah’s husband ‘Ali gave her body its funerary bath. A Shi’i pilgrim recovered the relic in Karbala and brought it to Golconda-Hyderabad during the reign of the seventh Qutb Shahi sultan, ‘Abdullah (r. 1626–1672). The wooden relic was carved into a wooden ṭughrā (calligram) inscribing the names Allah, Muhammad, and ‘Ali, which was then sealed over with a metal alloy of gold and brass. The inscriptions placed on ‘alams focus a devotee’s gaze. On the Bībī kā ‘alam, mirrorwork calligraphy, known as musannā, employs the names Allah, Muhammad, and ‘Ali to create an anthropomorphic form. The exact mirroring of these three names on each side of the ‘alam forms a nose, mouth, ears, and two eyes with eyebrows above (see Fig. 1). The ‘alam’s ears are studded with two green pouches embroidered with the names ‘Ali and Fatimah, which are filled with precious jewels. To the devotee gazing on the ‘alam, these embroidered pouches have the appearance of dangling emerald earrings. In the Shi’i tradition, emerald (zumurrud) symbolizes the inherited spiritual authority of the Imams. These ear pouches are two of the six jewel-filled, embroidered bags that adorn the ‘alam. The Bībī kā ‘alam, as it is popularly known, occupies a special, sacred class of ‘alams for the Hyderabadi Shi’a. Containing Fatimah’s funerary plank, is a reliquary ‘alam and, while Hyderabad is distinctive for the extraordinary number of
relics it possesses that are associated with the Imams and Ahl-e Bait, very few connect
to Shiʿi women saints. As Hyderabad’s consummate reliquary ʿalam, the Bībī kā ʿalam
is accorded top spiritual ranking, symbolized through material practices that convey
royal status: adornment with jewels and floral garlands and shading with a parasol.
When she was taken out in procession for viewing by devotees and the other ʿalams in
the city during the reigns of the Qutb Shahi sultans and the Sunni Asaf Jahi Nizams (r.
1724–1948), the Bībī kā ʿalam was further heralded by the imperial fish ensign, the māhī
marātib. 

Figure 3. Māhī marātib, Bībī kā Alāvā, Hyderabad. Photo by author, 2006.
Devotees may view the ālam, and access Fatimah’s intercessory powers and blessings, both within the āshūrkhānah precincts and in her annual procession. On the afternoon of 10 Muharram, the Bībī kā ālam leaves the āshūrkhānah in the Dabirpura neighborhood to undertake a grand, royal procession that makes its way through the Old City atop an elephant, where she can be seen by tens of thousands of devotees. Accompanying the ālam in procession are associations (anjuman or gurūh) that perform various types of bloody self-flagellation (khūnī mātam) with their hands and implements to which chains and blades are attached (zanjīr zanī). Striking oneself on the chest for extended periods of time until the skin splits open, or lashing the back with chains and blades, drawing copious amounts of blood is an expression of Shiʿi love and loyalty to Fatimah al-Zahra and in recognition of the sacrifice of Fatimah’s son Husain on the Karbala battlefield in 680 CE. The elephant is accompanied by a rank of fourteen steel ālams of varying designs that are carried on extra-long poles (nāʿizah) (Fig. 5). The length of these poles serves to convey the status of the ālams and allows them to serve as clarions announcing the impending arrival of the exalted Bībī kā ālam. In Hyderabad, a nāʿizah’s length connotes an ālam’s status—the taller the pole, the more exalted the standard, exemplified by the naʿī-e mubārak ālam, containing Hyderabad’s oldest Shiʿi relic, a piece of Imam Husain’s helmet. Steel is associated with martial prowess, and the fourteen steel ālams that proceed the Bībī kā ālam have a dual signifying role. Primarily, they announce and serve as protective sentinels over the Bībī
kā ʿalam’s movement through the Old City in her royal cortege. Secondarily, the number fourteen plays on Shiʿi number symbolism, invoking the “Fourteen Infallibles” (chārdah ma ṣūmīn), the Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah, and the twelve Imams.

The Hyderabadi Shiʿa invoke the presence of the shāhzādī-ye kaunain, the Mistress of the Two Worlds (Fatimah), through a repertoire of rituals and material objects that emphasize her exalted status as the mother of the Imamate, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, and the caretaker of the house of sorrows (bait al-ḥzān) who bears witness to the tears shed by those loyal to her family and its cause. The Bībī kāʿalam, the rituals that take place at its ʿāshūrkhānah, and the massive 10 Muharram procession, which has thrived for more than 350 years, reflect the deep traditions of devotion among the Hyderabadi Shiʿa to Fatimah’s intercessory powers as a saint endowed with the grace to intervene in the affairs of this world and the next.

Both Shiʿi and Hindu devotees perform rituals of hospitality (making offerings and prayers of supplication) while participating in acts of reciprocal...
gazing with the Bībī kā ʿalam, whether installed in the ʿāshūrkhānah or taken out in grand procession on 10 Muharram. For Hindus, this ritual act is darśan, for Shiʿa, it is naẓar or didār. In both contexts it is an act of auspicious gazing with an object that the practitioner believes contains the embodiment of the god (Hindu context) or Imam (Shiʿa context), to whom greetings, prayers, offerings, and supplications must be made with the correct etiquette and purity of heart. Making supplicatory prayers, vows, and performing the rituals of “visitation” (ziyārat) are deeply personal acts of devotion that take place between a devotee and the Imam or member of the Prophet Muhammad’s family (the Ahl-e Bait), that the ʿalam represents. David Pinault has described Shiʿa acts of religious seeing as darśanic, fundamentally “imagistic in orientation.”¹⁵ In his work on immateriality and presence, Victor Buchli has argued that nearness “is achieved through an icon.”¹⁶ I agree with Pinault and Buchli’s assessment of the imagistic and proximal power the icon exerts over the devotee as “viewer,” however, this action is never one-sided, and it is enveloped in a web of other ritual acts and desires that activate the gaze and its intercessory response. Vows, supplications, and visitations to the Imams and Ahl-e Bait are intimately bound up in acts of mutual visual exchange before image-objects such as ʿalams and taʿziyas (replica of Imam Husain’s Karbala shrine-tomb) in Shiʿa South Asia. While Muharram is a period of mourning for the suffering and martyrdom of Imam Husain and his family at Karbala, it is also a time much anticipated by the Shiʿa, when gazing on the ʿalams affirms bonds of loyalty and love for members of the Ahl-e Bait, assuring their enduring presence in absence.

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Citation Guide


Notes

1. The majlis-e ʿazā is a commemorative mourning assembly that takes place during Muharram as well as at other times throughout the year to remember the martyrdom of the Imams and other members of the Ahl-e Bait. The majlis is presided over by a ṣākir (fem. ṣākirah, lit. “one who remembers”), who delivers a thematic discourse called the ṣikr (usually) related to the event being consoled. The discourse is divided into two parts, the first extolling the virtues of the martyr and the Ahl-e Bait, which draws on
verses from the Qur’ān, poetry, hadith, and Shi’i martyrdom narratives (maqtaṭal). The second half of the discourse is called the maṣāʾ ib (suffering), which brings assembly participants to tears as the ṣākim describes the affliction and death of the martyr in simple, vivid, and deeply intimate language.


4. The ʿāshūrkhānah is a distinctly Deccani architectural form of Shi’i religious architecture that is not found outside of South India, although diasporic Shi’a are establishing domestic ʿāshūrkhānahs in their homes with ʿalams and other objects of devotion they have brought from their natal communities. During Muharram in other parts of India, including Lucknow, Delhi, and Mumbai, and in Karachi, Lahore, and Multan, Pakistan, mourning assemblies are held and ʿalams and taʿziya (replica of Imam Husain’s Karbala shrine-tomb) are displayed in other types of religious buildings, notably the imāmbāṛā (the enclosure of the Imam) and imāmbārgāh (the court of the Imam). For a discussion of Shi’i religious architecture and ways space is materially and ritually engaged, see chapter three in my monograph Everyday Shi’ism in South Asia (Hoboken: Wiley, 2021).

5. I am writing specifically about the meaning and function of the ʿalam in the South Asian Shi’i context. I do not aim to speak generally for the signifying operation of the ʿalam in the broader Shi’i world because such material practice and their rituals are co-constituted by normative sources and traditions that are produced by Shi’i as in everyday religious life.


7. Sadiq Naqvi, The ʿĀshūr Khānas of Hyderābād City (Hyderabad: Bab-ul-Ilm Society, 2006), 69.

8. Calligraphy in the shape of a human face finds its consummate expression in the iconography of the Turkish Bektashi Sufi tradition, where Frank de Jong explains the calligraphic mirroring reflects the exoteric (ẓāhir) and esoteric (bāṭin) realities of being. He notes that when ʿAli’s name is written in mirror image, it expresses the Bektashi doctrine: “ʿAli ʿAllah: ʿAli Allah ʿAllah: ‘Ali is God.” According to de Jong, such iconographic calligraphic images are an aesthetic and decorative “statement of religious identity, and psychological, as a visual representation of the essentials of Bektashi/Alevi belief.” For further discussion, see “The Iconography of Bektashiism: A Survey of Themes and Symbolism in Clerical Costume, Liturgical Objects and Pictorial Art,” Manuscripts of the Middle East 4 (1989): 12. In the South Asian context, Hussein Keshani’s study of inscriptions on the Hussainabad Imāmbāṛā in Lucknow indicates the importance of iconographic calligraphic images in South Asian Shi’ism. Keshani documents calligraphic mirroring to express key Shi’i doctrinal statements such as the
shahāda including the declaration, “ʿAli is the friend of God.” For further analysis and photographs of the Hussainabad Imāmbara, refer to Hussain Keshani, “The Writing on the Walls: Selections from the Twelver Shiʿi Epigraphs of Lucknow’s Hussainabad Imambara,” in People of the Prophet’s House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shiʿi Islam, ed. Fahmida Suleman (London: Azimuth Editions, 2015), 115-125. Writing about Hyderabad Shiʿism, Diane D’Souza observed the distinctly anthropomorphic qualities of the city’s ʿalams: “For the outsider it is hard to overlook the anthropomorphic character of the ʿalam. Jewels or stylized earrings may be incorporated to link the icon to personalities that are part of an inherited Shia worldview,” in Partners of Zaynab: A Gendered Perspective of Shia Muslim Faith (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 147. Although not directly about the ʿalam, Tryna Lyons’s essay documenting the history of taʿziya construction and their procession rituals in Multan, Pakistan offers fascinating insights into the intrinsically anthropomorphic qualities of these monumental likenesses (shabīh) of Imam Husain’s Karbala shrine-tomb, notably the symbolism of the cupola to the Imam’s head. See Tryna Lyons, “Some Historic Taʿziyas of Multan,” in People of the Prophet’s House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shiʿi Islam, ed. Fahmida Suleman (London: Azimuth Editions, 2015), 221-231.


12. This relic was gifted to the fourth sultan, Ibrahim (r. 1550–1580), who had the relic fashioned into a calligraphic ʿalam in the form of the name Allah, which is covered with a thick layer of sandalwood paste. Ruffle, “Presence in Absence,” 339.


15. David Pinault, Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 18; see also Ruffle, “Gazing in the Eyes of the Martyrs,” 284.

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