

# Bībī kā ‘Alam

Karen G. Ruffle



Figure 1. Bībī kā ‘alam, Hyderabad. Photo by author, 2006.

- 1 The first time I saw the *Bībī kā ‘alam* 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 Shi‘a 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 Hyderabad 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 *‘āshūrkhānah* (a ritual space discussed below), located in Purani Haveli, a Shi‘i neighborhood in Hyderabad’s Old City.<sup>1</sup> Riding around in a pair of autorickshaws, we spent an afternoon visiting the many public and private *‘āshūrkhānahs* in the Old City, where we paid our respects to these sacred objects.
- 2 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 ‘Ali, 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 Bībī kā Alāvā, Hyderabad. Photo by author, 2006.

- 3 In Hyderabad, the capital of the southern state of Telangana with a booming population of more than ten million, the city's Shi'i population is but a fraction of the total, estimated in 2017 to be approximately 200,000.<sup>2</sup> 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 ‘Abdullah (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.<sup>3</sup>



- 4 Since the sixteenth century, the *‘alam* has been the religious symbol par excellence for the Hyderabadī 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.<sup>4</sup> *‘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.<sup>5</sup> 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.
- 5 The *‘alam* displayed at the Bībī kā Alāvā *‘āshūrkhānah* is one of the most beloved by the Hyderabadī 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 Shahī sultan, ‘Abdullah (r. 1626–1672).<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> The inscriptions placed on *‘alams* focus a devotee’s gaze. On the Bībī kā *‘alam*, mirrorwork calligraphy, known as *muṣannā*, 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).<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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 Hyderabadī 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 Shi'i women saints.<sup>10</sup> As Hyderabad's consummate reliquary 'alam, the Bībī kā 'alam 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 'alams in the city during the reigns of the Qutb Shahi sultans and the Sunni Asaf Jahi Nizams (r. 1724–1948), the Bībī kā 'alam was further heralded by the imperial fish ensign, the *māhī marātib*.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 3. Māhī marātib, Bībī kā Alāvā, Hyderabad. Photo by author, 2006.



Figure 4. Elephant Procession with Bībī kā ‘alam on elephant, Hyderabad. Photo by author, 2005.

- 6 Devotees may view the ‘alam, 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 ‘alam 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 ‘alam 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 Shi‘i 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 ‘alams of varying designs that are carried on extra-long poles (*nā’izah*) (Fig. 5). The length of these poles serves to convey the status of the ‘alams and allows them to serve as clarions announcing the impending arrival of the exalted Bībī kā ‘alam. In Hyderabad, a *nā’izah*’s length connotes an ‘alam’s status—the taller the pole, the more exalted the standard, exemplified by the *na’l-e mubārak* ‘alam, containing Hyderabad’s oldest Shi‘i relic, a piece of Imam Husain’s helmet.<sup>12</sup> Steel is associated with martial prowess, and the fourteen steel ‘alams that proceed the Bībī kā ‘alam have a dual signifying role. Primarily, they announce and serve as protective sentinels over the Bībī



kā ‘alam’s movement through the Old City in her royal cortege. Secondly, the number fourteen plays on Shi‘i number symbolism, invoking the “Fourteen Infallibles” (*chārdah ma ‘šūmīn*), the Prophet Muhammad, Fatimah, and the twelve Imams.



Figure 5. Steel ‘alams, 10 Muharram procession, Hyderabad. Photo by author, 2005.

- 7 The Hyderabadī Shi‘a 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-aḥzān*) who bears witness to the tears shed by those loyal to her family and its cause.<sup>13</sup> The Bībī kā ‘alam, the rituals that take place at its ‘āshūrkhānah, and the massive 10 Muharram procession, which has thrived for more than 350 years, reflect the deep traditions of devotion among the Hyderabadī Shi‘a to Fatimah’s intercessory powers as a saint endowed with the grace to intervene in the affairs of this world and the next.
- 8 Image-objects such as the Bībī kā ‘alam are experienced at the intersection of what I have theorized elsewhere as the religious sensorium, “a symbolically rich religio-social space where ritual practitioners engage with material objects and the body to produce sense experiences,” which in the Shi‘i context brings collective memory of Karbala into the present.<sup>14</sup> Both Shi‘i and Hindu devotees perform rituals of hospitality (making offerings and prayers of supplication) while participating in acts of reciprocal

gazing with the Bībī kā ‘alam, whether installed in the ‘āshūrkhānah or taken out in grand procession on 10 Muharram. For Hindus, this ritual act is *darśan*, for Shi‘a, it is *naẓar* or *ḍidār*. 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 (Shi‘i 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 ‘alam represents. David Pinault has described Shi‘i acts of religious seeing as *darśanic*, fundamentally “imagistic in orientation.”<sup>15</sup> In his work on immateriality and presence, Victor Buchli has argued that nearness “is achieved through an icon.”<sup>16</sup> 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 ‘alams and *ta’ziyas* (replica of Imam Husain’s Karbala shrine-tomb) in Shi‘i 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 Shi‘a, when gazing on the ‘alams 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

1. Karen Ruffle, “Bībī kā ‘Alam,” Object Narrative, *MAVCOR Journal* 6, no. 2 (2022), doi: 10.22332/mav.obj.2022.4.

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## Notes

1. The *majlis-e ‘azā* 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 *zākir*

(fem. *zākirah*, lit. “one who remembers”), who delivers a thematic discourse called the *zīkr* (usually) related to the event being condoled. 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’an, poetry, *hadith*, and Shi‘i martyrdom narratives (*maqtaḥ*). The second half of the discourse is called the *maṣā’ib* (suffering), which brings assembly participants to tears as the *zākir* describes the affliction and death of the martyr in simple, vivid, and deeply intimate language.

2. “Hyderabad’s Shi‘a Community Ready for 10<sup>th</sup> Muharram Procession” *Business Standard*, September 30, 2017, <http://hdl.handle.net/10079/79001e4f-a5f5-4722-9cf4-f213452a97e8>.

3. Karen G. Ruffle, “Presence in Absence: The Formation of Reliquary Shi‘ism in Qutb Shahi Hyderabad,” *Material Religion* 13, no. 3 (2017): 329-353.

4. The ‘āshūrkhānah 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 ‘āshūrkhānahs in their homes with ‘alams 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 ‘alams and *ta’ziya* تعزیه (replica of Imam Husain’s Karbala shrine-tomb) are displayed in other types of religious buildings, notably the *imāmbārā* امامبارا (the enclosure of the Imam) and *imāmbārgāh* امامبارگاه (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 ‘alam in the South Asian Shi‘i context. I do not aim to speak generally for the signifying operation of the ‘alam 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‘as in everyday religious life.

6. Karen G. Ruffle, “Presence in Absence,” 340-341.

7. Sadiq Naqvi, *The ‘Āshūr 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 (*zāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) realities of being. He notes that when ‘Ali’s name is written in mirror image, it expresses the Bektashi doctrine: “‘Ali<sup>un</sup> Allah<sup>u</sup> : ‘Ali Allahdır : ‘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 Imāmbārā in Lucknow indicates the importance of iconographic calligraphic images in South Asian Shi'ism. Keshani documents calligraphic mirroring to express key Shi'ī doctrinal statements such as the *shahāda* including the declaration, "‘Ali is the friend of God." For further analysis and photographs of the Hussainabad Imāmbārā, refer to Hussain Keshani, "The Writing on the Walls: Selections from the Twelver Shi'ī Epigraphs of Lucknow's Hussainabad Imambara," in *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'ī Islam*, ed. Fahmida Suleman (London: Azimuth Editions, 2015), 115-125. Writing about Hyderabadī Shi'ism, Diane D'Souza observed the distinctly anthropomorphic qualities of the city's 'alams: "For the outsider it is hard to overlook the anthropomorphic character of the 'alam. 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 'alam, Tryna Lyons's essay documenting the history of *ta'ziya* 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 *Ta'ziyas* of Multan," in *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'ī Islam*, ed. Fahmida Suleman (London: Azimuth Editions, 2015), 221-231.

9. Karen G. Ruffle, "Gazing in the Eyes of the Martyrs: Four Theories of South Asian Visuality," *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World* 1, no. 1 (2020): 277.

10. For extended discussion of the relics associated with Fatimah in Hyderabad, see Karen G. Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather Our Tears: The Mystical and Intercessory Powers of Fatimah al-Zahra in Indo-Persian, Shi'ī Devotional Literature and Performance," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3 (2010): 391-392.

11. Ruffle, "Presence in Absence," 338.

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

13. For further discussion of the concept of the "house of sorrows," see Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Āshūrā' in Twelver Shi'ism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978); regarding Fatimah's intercessory powers, Karen G. Ruffle, "May Fatimah Gather Our Tears," 386-397.

14. Karen G. Ruffle, *Everyday Shi'ism in South Asia*, 166.

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.

16. Victor Buchli, “Presencing the Im-Material,” In *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss*, ed. Mikkel Bille, et al. (New York: Springer, 2010), 109.



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