

TA'ZIA:

EPHEMERAL ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA

Shakeel Hossain

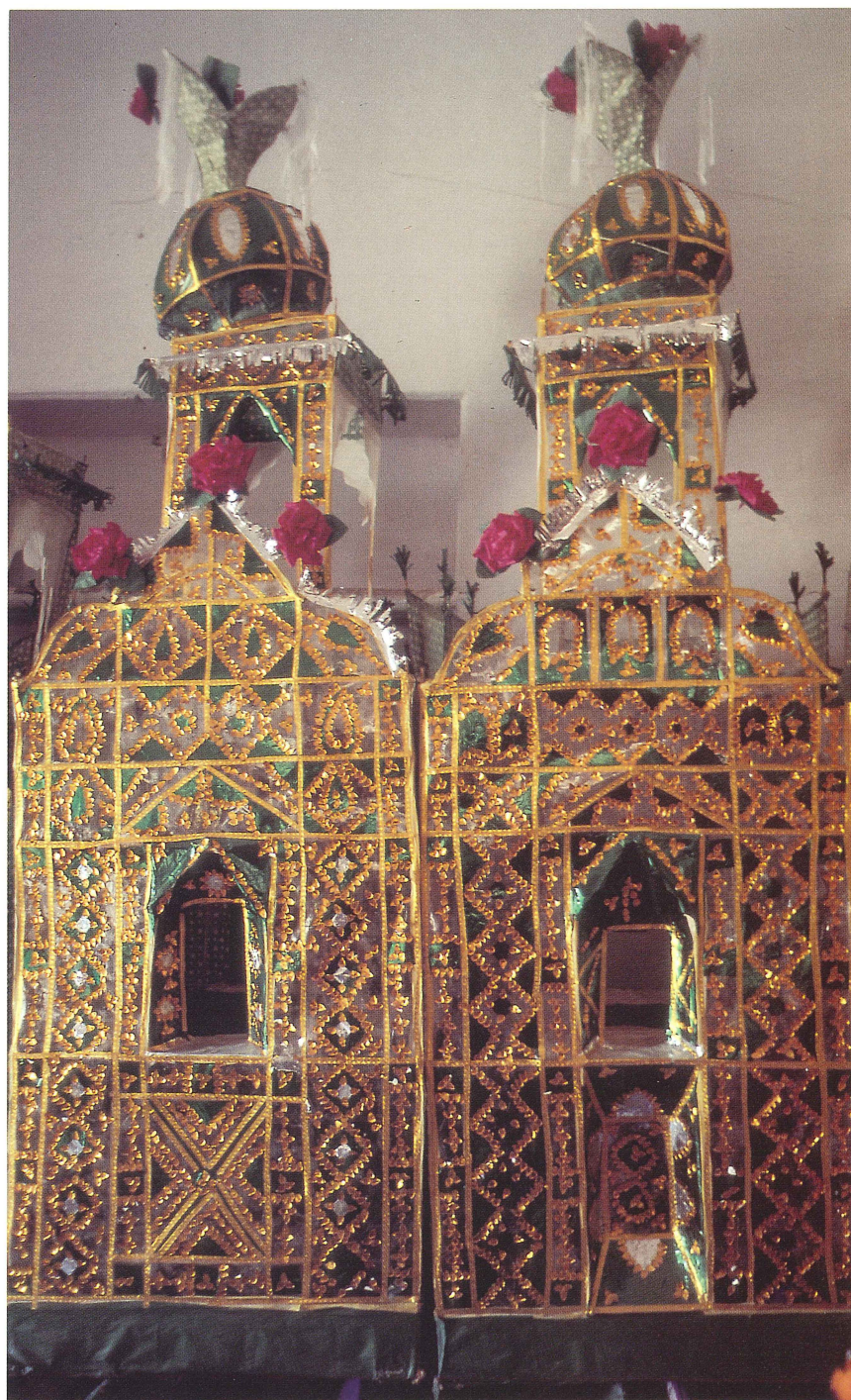


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Ta'zia commemorates the martyrdom of Husain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was slaughtered by the army of Caliph Ya'zid – his religious and political opponent. A word signifying mourning, ta'zia manifests itself in different forms throughout the 'Islamic' world. In Iraq it is the ritual narration of the sufferings of shi'a martyrs. In Iran, ta'zia is the passion play that portrays the tragedy of Karbala where Husain and his faithfuls were killed. In India, however, ta'zia takes the form of ephemeral architecture often symbolizing the tomb of Husain. The artefacts are taken out in processions during the annual mourning observance in Muharram (the first month of the Islamic year), and buried at the local Karbalas (pilgrimage sites) on the tenth day of the month – the day Husain was killed (680 A.D.).

The tragedy of Karbala further segregated Shi'a and Sunni, the two major sects in Islam. On the death of Muhammad, who was a prophet and a statesman, Islam was to decide who would be their leader, of both state and religion. The Sunni'ite, who derived their name from the Arabic word meaning 'tradition', felt that in accordance with the ancient Arabic custom, the leader should be chosen through election; whereas the Shi'a believed that since Muhammad was the messenger of God and no ordinary man, his successor should be a blood relation. They recognized Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, as the legitimate Caliph (successor of Muhammad). But the Caliphate was finally established through election, and the desire of the Shi'a that the Caliphate in Islam be kept in the family of the Prophet was never fulfilled.¹

As the energies of the Shi'a forces met with resistance in the field of politics, their belief became transformed into religious fervour, and passion as a motive came to be the basis of their salvation. Along with this, the martyrdom of one Imam after another further increased the vigour of their belief. It was not so much the murder of Ali that formed the passionate core in Shi'ism, it was the slaughter of Husain at Karbala that moulded the spirit of Shi'a. The tragedy of Karbala auspicated the essence of Shi'ism; and



became central to its myths and arts.

In time the forces of 'unusual' emotion of the Shi'a in their annual commemoration of Husain's martyrdom robustly spawned and fertilized the arts of Muharram – especially in India, where – influenced by the dynamics and vitality of its many diverse cultures – Muharram gave rise to unique forms of art and architecture. In fact, the rich and infinite art of ta'zia in India could never have been conceived and brought to such vitality without the support of this substructure.

Initially the religious observance of Husain's martyrdom started with the annual pilgrimage to Karbala. Later this developed into mourning procession, as

Ta'zias made from split bamboo and paper, Lucknow. Bazaars are held in Lucknow in the first three weeks of Muharram where hundreds of ta'zias, measuring from six inches to six feet, are sold. Such ta'zias are bought by the Shi'a families, which they keep in their houses till Ashura, 10th Muharram, and then bury them in the local Karbalas.

1 Ali was elected the fourth Caliph, but he was assassinated after a partial rule of five years, from 35-40 A.H./656-661 A.D. After which, though the Shi'a proclaimed Ali's eldest son, Hasan, as the next Caliph, he gave up his claim to Mu'awiya, his rival, and died soon after. On Hasan's death, his younger brother became the next leader of the Shi'a and focus of their aspiration. This saga ended with the legendary tragedy of Karbala.

in Iran, with the Shi'as carrying biers made from date palms to burial grounds to symbolize the martyrdom of Husain. In modern Iran the bier took the form of Nakl, an "upright lattice shaped like a tear-drop that is often so large that it has to be carried by hundreds of people."² In

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India the symbol of Husain's martyrdom used in the mourning procession emerged as an ephemeral mausoleum, which came to be known as ta'zia.

David Parry points out that martyrdoms are eventually celebrated in a variety of processional forms, and frequently including the carrying of objects emblematic of the respective martyrdoms – the shrine of Husain at Karbala, the cross, and so on.³ But as one learns more about the meanings and forms of ta'zia, and the related rituals, one discovers that it is not so much a symbol of Husain's shrine, but rather more a mark of Shi'ite passion and reverence for Imam Husain's cause, and his martyrdom.

The tradition of tombs of Islamic India stimulated the evolution of Shi'ite funerary elements and ritual tombs into architectural forms. The tradition of tombs and minars existed in India from early eleventh century – which was the beginning of Islamic settlement in India. Since then the Muslim rule in India was marked by many great monumental tombs which with time became symbolic of Indo-Islamic culture, and of power. The grand mausoleums of the Mughals and other Muslim rulers seemingly fed the imagination of the Indian Shi'a, and further inspired the devotional passion into creating religious monuments beyond orthodox realities.

Though "heterodox ritual worshipping of the tombs of the descendants of Ali", as expressed by Oleg Grabar,⁴ had been a common practice among the Shi'a throughout their history, this was also frequently fuelled in India by the popular practice of venerating dargahs (shrines) of Sufi saints. On one hand the concept of divine manifestations of Ali and his descendants in Shi'ism was seductive to the mystical goals of the Sufis to 'unite' with God – with the result Ali, Hasan, and Husain became the ideal fatas for the Sufis: "There is no fata but Ali, and no sword but Dhu'l-Fiqar." On the other hand, inspired by this sentiment, the Shi'as in India were drawn towards the practice of venerating (mock) shrines, and seeking mystical help of Alids in fulfillment of their desires and in crises.

In addition, the devotional aspects of tombs in India became instrumental in Shi'ite expressions of devotion to the Alids. In a sense, it became the desire of every Shi'a to offer a mausoleum to their beloved martyr. We are familiar with the fact that besides power and identity, tombs in India were symbols of love and devotion. Emperor Shah Jahan built the magnificent Taj Mahal to express his undying love for Mumtaz Mahal. Akbar erected Fatehpur-Sikri to declare his devotion to a Sufi saint. In a similar way the tradition of ta'zia emerged from the

in-depth devotion of the Shi'a for the Alids. Later this became the more driving force for its artistic continuity, and it was in this capacity, as an expression of love and devotion, that the ingenious and infinitely varied art of ta'zia grew.

Peter Chelkowski argues "The Ta'ziyeh of Iran is ritual theatre and derives its form and its content from deep-rooted religious traditions. But although it is Islamic in appearance, it is strongly Persian, drawing vital inspiration from its special political and cultural heritage".⁵ I believe that the roots of the form and nature of Indian ta'zia lie in the cultural identity of Islam India – the tradition of tombs and minars; and that the ritual ceremony of Ta'zia owes its beginning to Hindu festivals of carrying flamboyant shrines and idols. In other words, though the essence of ta'zia originates from common religious beliefs of the Shi'a, its diverse forms and rituals germinate from the indigenous cultural traditions and sentiments that survive across time and ideologies.

The architectural language of ta'zias today bears no relation to the original reference, the shrine of Husain at Karbala. I would argue that ta'zia epitomizing Husain's tomb is a later addition to the tradition. One cannot expect that ta'zia, being a popular expression, to be attempting to recreate an historical reality. Ta'zia is a creative expression beyond truth – a dimension that is normally associated with belief and devotion.

Today, in cities like Jaipur, Hyderabad, and Calcutta, the 20-30 feet high ta'zias, glitteringly decorated, are carried in processions through narrow lanes and main streets, bringing all traffic to a halt. In Lucknow, ingeniously crafted ta'zias, measuring 6 inches to 10 feet in height, are sold in bazaars especially set up during Muharram. In Amroha, all overhead telephone and electric cables are disconnected to allow the four-storey high ta'zia, made of fiercely coloured paper, to move through the city's narrow winding streets. In the villages, on the other hand, untainted by the growing communal crisis in the cities, the tradition of ta'zia has come to be observed with even greater gusto and daring. In fact, the ta'zias here have become the objects of rivalry between neighbouring villages: each trying to build one taller or bigger than the other. However, their forms are very simple, consisting mainly of square towers, brightly decorated with symbols from Karbala, like the horse (of Husain), swords and shields, date palms, and tents.

In many villages and small towns where there are strong concentrations of Shi'a, the ta'zia processions are more cultural and social events where Shi'as, Sunnis, and Hindus alike take part. The

significance of ta'zia as symbol of martyrdom and devotion embodies an art that is basic to all humanity, and therefore it seems to enjoy a kind of affluence here that spreads beyond the bounds of religion. Sometimes the craftsmen who make the ta'zias are Hindus, primarily because the structure requires their skill and know-how. Though generally made from split bamboo and paper, ta'zias throughout India continue to be made from materials as diverse as wax, wood, clay, sugar and wheatsprouts, silver, anything and everything; each with its own form and spirit.

Ta'zia rituals, with their transient character, have parallels in Hindu culture which is full of ceremonies where ephemeral Gods and Goddesses, and sometimes symbolic temples, are carried around the community and then immersed in the river. In India, Shi'ite tradition and rituals – which evolved from the concept of religious worship focused upon the divine forces of Ali and his descendants – closely reflected that of Hindu religious concept of devotion. Consequently, the forms and motifs of Shi'ite art that grew out of this fusion became richer through this stimulation.

The times and nature of ta'zia processions vary from place to place, but the main procession in all Shi'a communities is carried out on Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram. On this day the ta'zias of all the martyrs are taken to the local Karbalas (pilgrimage sites), and buried. Today there are Karbalas all over India. Every Shi'a Mohalla has its own Karbala. There is no structure built here, for it marks the passion of Imam Husain; in the words of Peter Chelkowski, "at a time which is no time, and in a space which is no space. In other words, what happened in the battle field of Karbala is as if taking place now, in any place where the Shi'a live."⁶ They are also the burial grounds of the Shi'a, for it is the desire of every Shi'a to have died fighting for Imam Husain at Karbala.

Ta'zia embodies the centre of devotion in the Shi'a to the cause and principles of Husain at Karbala. It marks the core of Shi'ite art as well as its spirit and

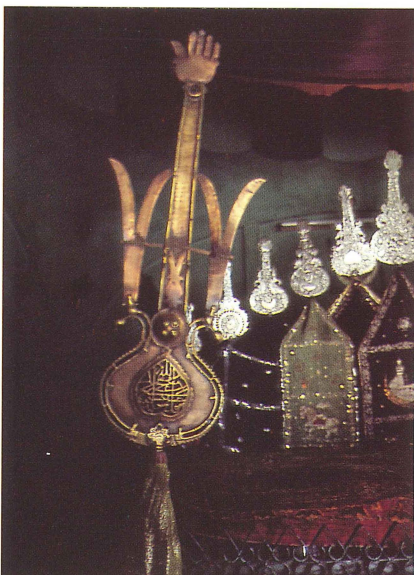
2 Peter Chelkowski, *Shi'a Muslim Processional Performances, Drama Review*, Volume 29 Number 3, 1985.

3 David Parry, *Festival and Drama: Taziyyeh and the European Tradition*, an essay, A Drama Festival and Conference, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, 1988.

4 Oleg Grabar, *Art and Architecture of Islam 650-1250, Pelican History of Art*, Penguin Books, England, p. 216.

5 Peter Chelkowski, ed., *Tazi'yeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, New York University Press, 1979, p. 1.

6 Peter Chelkowski, *Popular Shi'a Mourning Rituals*, Al-Serat, XII/I (Spring, 1986).



principles which today lie shrouded in overwhelming accounts of terror and violence. Tainted by the prevailing political drama, Shi'ism is often associated with fantacism and terrorism rather than with rich and sophisticated myths and arts. The grave and ingenuous symbolism of ta'zia unfolds the diversity and richness of Shi'ite culture; and offers perhaps a tool to understand the complexities within Shi'ism from the point of view of its art and architecture that stand free of political judgement. By illustrating how the indigenous popular traditions become entwined with the religious beliefs and rituals of the Shi'as, ta'zia also provides a language for a more informed dialogue about cultural diversity and regional identity.

The photographs here show how beliefs and rituals are manifested in art and

architecture, and how when literal 'truth' and 'rationalness' are not important, diverse art forms exist without effort, even when confined within religious doctrine.

Above: Village Naugauh, Uttar Pradesh, on the day of Ashura. Shi'as from the nearby villages gather here with their ta'zias before the main ta'zia procession begins. This provides a ground for the display of their ta'zias to rival communities, and for people to revere them.

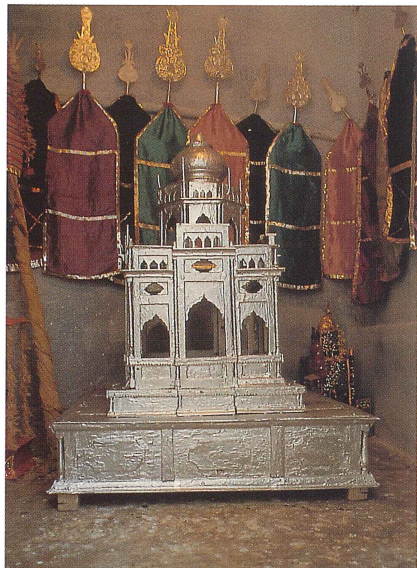
Centre: Punjas, Lucknow. They represent the standard of Imam Husain, and the political and religious principles of Shi'a. Punja derives its name from its most essential motif depicting a hand (punja). This symbol firstly speaks of the massacre at Karbala by representing the hand of Hazrat Abbas, the half-brother and standard bearer of Husain, which was cut off while getting water for the thirsty women and children of Husain's family. Secondly, it embodies the Shi'ite religious belief of the Five Pure Ones in Islam – Muhammad, Fatima, Ali, Hasan, and Husain.



Left: Tabut, Calcutta. Ta'zias have not replaced the original ceremony of carrying tabuts, symbolic biers of Imam Husain. They are also carried to the burial grounds where the participants mourn and weep in front of the tabuts before burying them.

NOTE ON ILLUSTRATIONS

The photographs here are by Shakeel Hossain and were taken in a small section of North India which included two major cities, Calcutta and Lucknow; two small towns in Uttar Pradesh, Amroha and Rampur; and the village of Naugauh.





Opposite top left: Wooden zareeh – representations of the tombs of Shi'a martyrs, Lucknow.

Opposite top right: Many children and families make their own ta'zias. The photograph, taken in village Naugauh, shows a ta'zia made from used electric bulbs covered with coloured paper.

Opposite below: Tabut procession, Amroha. Tabuts of both Hasan and Husain are taken out during the processions here. Hasan's bier is green because he died of poison and green was his favourite colour. Husain's tabut is represented by the red colour because red was his favourite colour and because he died a bloody death.

Right: Detail of ta'zia from a neighbouring village to Naugauh.

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Opposite top right: Generally the smaller ta'zias in Lucknow are made by the women. These women are familiar with the materials, split bamboos and paper, as they are also the kite-makers here.

Opposite top left: Smaller ta'zias are sold in the bazaar, Lucknow. The colours red and green represents the colours of Husain and Hasan respectively.

Opposite below: Ta'zias, Lucknow.

Below: Main ta'zia, village Naugauh.



