

Commemoration of Ashura Rituals: A Case Study of Imambargah Hussainia in Rural Jhang, Pakistan

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Abstract: Present research based on the ethnographic study conducted in 2009 and 2010, during Muharram in a Punjabi village vis-à-vis Chak No. 253/JB¹(*Nangay Sundray*), Jhang. Further, the sections like history of Sials, Jhang and evolution of *Shi'a* Muharram rituals is purely based on the review of literature. The religious schism surfaced soon after the death of Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) further gave the birth to the emergence of Sunni-*Shi'a* identities. To give the strong foundations of the each brand of Islam; Sunnis and *Shi'as* divided in practical Islam. Later on the incident of Karbala laid the foundations of the *Shi'a* Muharram rituals. These rituals not only followed by follower in Iran and Iraq but it expanded to the other regions as well. Present study aims at understanding the nature of *Shi'a* Muharram rituals but more specifically in the context of the Ashura-first ten days of Muharram (some scholars also include the 12th day of Muharram in Ashura). This research paper also sheds light on the early schism in Muslim society, incident of Karbala and the evolution and spread of *Shi'a* Muharram rituals. The devotees at Imambargah Hussainia still remember the incident of Karbala and commemorate it with full devotion.

Key words: Islam • Religious Schism • *Shi'ism* • Ashura Rituals • Sial • *Nangas* • Imambargah Hussainia • Rural Punjab • Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Community and Imambargah Hussainia: There are about 95 percent *Shi'as* in village, Chak No. 253/JB (*Nangay Sundray*). It is situated about 35 kilometers on the Jhang-Faisalabad road in the East of the Jhang city in Punjab province. Local sources inform that this village was established during Agricultural Reforms Program initiated by the British Colonial Empire aiming at the agriculture expansion. The majority of the village population is *Nanga* by caste. *Nanga* is the sub-clan of *Bharwana* and *Bharwana* is the sub-clan of Sial. Sials are divided into more than a hundred clans. All sub-clan names have the suffix *Ana* such as *Chucchkana*, *Mighiana*, *Tarhana*, *Hasnana* and *Bharwana* [1]. There are different theories over the origin of the Sial caste, “one theory says that *Seu*, *Teu* and *Gheu* were three brothers from a tribe of the *Agnikula* clan. It is believed that the *Tiwanas* are the descendants of *Teu*, the *Ghebas* of Rawalpindi are the descendants of *Gheu* while the Sials of Jhang are the descendants of *Seu* (also known as *Rai Sial*).” According to another theory, the Sials migrated from Rajputana to the Pakpattan area, where they embraced Islam after coming under the

¹“JB” is abbreviation of the Canal “Jhang Branch”, which irrigates this village, as these villages were, established under ‘Canal Irrigation Project’ during colonial period in the second last decade of the 19th century. The numbers of Villages were given according to the water outlets/channels starting form Chak No. 1 and ending at the point where this water channel finishes

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influence of Baba Fariduddin Mas'ud Ganj Shakar at Ajodhan. From there, they came to Jhang which was then administered by the *Nauls*, who represented the rulers of Delhi [2]. An account presented in the Jhang District Gazetteer [2] shows that the Sial probably were a pastoral tribe, but little given to animal husbandry, dwelling on the banks of the rivers and grazing their cattle during the end of the cold and the first month of the hot weather in the lowlands of Chenab and during the rainy season in the uplands of the Bar.

The *Nangas* of this village predominantly spread all over the *Sandal Bar*.² Four major descendants of *Nangas* inhabit this village: *Chakar ke*³, *Wahab ke*, *Salhun ke*; and *Silabat ke*. The main descendants of *Chakar ke* are pastoral and most of the time moved along the bank of Chenab River in some 20 kilometers radius, in the North of the Jhang. Two other descendants (*Azam ke* and *Sheryar ke*⁴) lived in the area of *Shekhali*-a shrine of a locally renowned *pir*, some 10 kilometers in the North of Jhang. These lineages practiced agriculture and got some support under the well-installation reforms program introduced by the government. Among other castes of the village, *Bharwana* are second in number, but the Nanga inhabitants do not recognize them as an offshoot of their sub-clan. They believe that these *Bharwana* are originally *Khodhan* (a caste that inhabits in nearby villages) and currently settled here. *Chiryana*, *Bajwa* and small number of working castes (likewise: *Nai*, *Mochi*, *Kumhar*, *Musali*, *Tarkhan*; and *Jhatay* etc.) are also residing in the village. The social structure is solely dominated held by the landowners whilst the working class lends a good support for the landowners in the agricultural activities [1]. The village *Nangay Sundray* consists of about 2500 acres canal irrigated land, mostly owned by the families like *Nanga*, *Bharwana*, *Chiryana* and *Bajwa*. Majority of the castes of the village are *Shi'a*. Syed Shahbal Shah Bukhari-a descendant of Shah Surkh Bukhari and Sufi Saint Mehboob Alam, popularly known as Hazrat Shah Jewana (also *Pir Karorya*)⁵ converted *Nangas* of this village from *Sunni* to *Shi'a* a century back.

Imambargah Hussainia is situated at the boundary of two villages' Chak No. 253/JB and 254/JB, one and a half kilometer away from the main Jhang-Faisalabad road. It has a long history, as villagers recall the tales of their forefathers-who narrated that this Chak was initially established by *Kuryana* (a sub-caste of Sial tribe, who now inhabit Chak No. 254/JB) families of the nearby village more than a century back. One of their inhabitants pilgrimage to the holy shrine of the *Shi'a* Imams in Iran, Iraq and Syria. On his return, one night he intuited through a dream about the marking map of the Imambargah, on a land owned by him. In the morning, he discussed the dream with his family members and they set the foundation for an Imambargah on the very place where it is situated today. Later on, when Nanga families converted, they helped *Kuryana* families in establishing Imambargah. They were able to acquire the four acres government auctioned land which immediately was donated equally to the Imambargah and graveyard.⁶ Formerly, the neighboring villagers bury their dead at this place but later on the demarcated their own graveyards [1].

Origin of Religious Schism and the Emergence and Evolution of *Shi'a* Muharram Ritual: Firstly we will define the rituals in anthropological context. The rituals are cultural devices that facilitate the preservation of a social order and

²The Sandal Bar is a region between the rivers Chenab and Ravi in Punjab, Pakistan. It spreads over almost 80 km in width (west to east) and 40 km in length (north to south). "Bar", in the local language, means a forested area where there are no resources for cultivation, like water. This Bar is named after *Sandal*, thought to be the father of the legendary Punjabi hero, *Dulla Bhatti*. In older times, almost all the area of this bar was part of current district Jhang, but nowadays it is divided between the districts of Faisalabad, Jhang and Toba Tek Singh.

³"Ke" is a Punjabi word; in local context it is representing those families who are the offshoots of that specific lineage.

⁴Primarily these two lineages were part of the sub-caste Nanga and lived for some time along other lineages but after some time *Azam ke* moved to *Khanewal*-a district in Southern Punjab.

⁵The saint Shah Jewana's Tomb is some 30 Kilometers in the North of Jhang in a town known to his name. On 10 May, annual festivities are celebrated here. A huge number of people gather at the shrine to participate in the annual ceremony of lamp torching.

⁶This auction was won by four elders, three *Namdar*, *Manak* and *Sultan* form Nanga Families and one *Nader* was from the *Kuryana* Families.

provide means to comprehend the complex and paradoxical aspects of human existence, within a given societal context. Rituals pattern our life and our life cycle [3] providing order and stability to the group while marking change [4]. The distinguishing characteristics of rituals and their power, are contained in the use of symbols within a performance framework. The performance may be either privately or publicly enacted. The content of the symbols may be condensed versions of private, emotionally charged material or contain societal constructed meanings [5].

Shi's rituals and *Shi'a* studies in general have been focused by many Western scholars [6-17] as well as Eastern scholars [18-20]. The term *Shi'a* conveys the meaning of followers, party, group, associates, partisans, or in a rather loose sense, supporters [21]. The literal meaning of the *Shi'a* is follower and supporter; during the days when the word was used only in its common literal sense it was usually used along with the names of 'Ali', 'Usman' and 'Muawiyah'. Hence there would be the *Shi'ah of 'Ali'* the *Shi'ah of 'Usman'* and the *Shi'ah of 'Muawiyah'*. After some time the word *Shi'a* was used specifically for the followers of Imam Ali and during this period the article 'al' in the word "*al-shi'ah*" clearly denoted the followers of *ahl-al-bayat* (the family of Prophet).

The roots of the *Sunni-Shi'a* schism are found in the crisis of succession that occurred after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in 632 AD. The *Sunni* believe in the *Caliphate* while the *Shi'a* believe in the *Imamate*. *Shi'a* have traditionally believed that there was a chain of pious descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), beginning with his son-in-law Ali (d. 661 AD), who were meant to succeed him, one after the other, following his death. The *Shi'a* consider these *Imams* to be infallible religious guides for humanity, although not Prophets and also believe that devotion to the *Imams* brings them closer to God [22].

Elbadri [23] states that, in this rather neutral sense, the word "*Shi'a*" occurs a number of times in the Quran. A few verses are cited below:

As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects (*shiya'an*), you have no part in them in the least: their affair is with Allah: He will in the end tell them the truth of all that they did (Al-An'am 6:159).

Turn your back in repentance to Him and fear Him: establish regular prayers and be not you among those who join gods with Allah. Those who split up their religion and become (mere) sects (*Shiya'an*), each party (*hisbi*) rejoicing in that which is with itself (Ar-rum 30:31-32).

And most surely Abraham was among the *Shi'a* of him (i.e., Noah) (Quran 37:83).

And he (Moses) went into the city at a time when people (of the city) were not watching, so he found therein two men fighting, one being of his *Shi'a* and the other being his enemy and the one who was of his *Shi'a* cried out to him for help against the one who was of his enemy (Quran 28:15) [24].

Further, describing the *Sunni-Shi'a* conflict Lalani [25] argued that "historically the roots of *Shi'a* Islam go back to the time immediately following the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)" Madelung [26] discussed that "no event in history has divided Islam more profoundly and durably than the succession to Muhammad (PBUH). The right to occupy the Prophet's place at the head of the Muslim community after his death became a question of great religious significance which has separated Sunnites and Shiites until the present." Muslim society is and has been, pluralistic. The message of the Islam was revealed in the cultural milieu of the time and the resulting response had to be gradual, interactive and diverse. In the course of its rapid expansion, the *umma* established by the Prophet (PBUH) assimilated a variety of social groups with extremely diverse traditions and inclinations. The encounter of Islam with kaleidoscopic traditions resulted into varied interpretations and conceptions.

The Karbala incident occurred after the early divide in the Muslim community, which further alienated the two factions. For the brief explanation of the Karbala incident, Hussain [27] asserts that "to understand why *Shi'a* participate in these rituals, one must first know what it is that they are mourning. All historical sources concur that in the year 61 AH/680 CE, Hussain b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), refused to swear allegiance to Yazid b. Mu'awiyah, who was nominated heir to the caliphate by his father, Mu'awiyah. Many at that time believed

this appointment to be illegitimate because none of the previous caliphs were appointed by dynastic succession and all were at least nominally accepted by the majority of the Muslim population. Yazid's ascension represented the first instance of dynastic succession in Islam and established the Umayyad dynasty. Hussain and his small band of loyal followers protested...by refusing to pledge allegiance to Yazid. As a result, Hussain, with his seventy-two male followers, along with their women and children was surrounded and besieged for three days on the desert sands of Karbala, on the bank of the river Euphrates. Deprived of water during the siege, Hussain and his band of followers were attacked by the minimum 10,000 (and in some accounts, as many as 100,000) Umayyad soldiers. On the tenth day of the month of Muharram (a day now commonly referred to as Ashura), Hussain and the seventy-two stalwarts were dismembered and decapitated and the women and children were taken prisoners. The battle was much more than the slaughter of a small band of pious loyalists faithful to the family of the Prophet (PBUH) by an overwhelming military force. It was also an ideological struggle between a group of principled individuals and a militarily powerful political administration, emblazoning Hussain as the ultimate archetypal tragic hero."

Further Elbadri [23] states "the martyrdom of Hussain and his companions at the Battle of Karbala and the Ashura rituals that ensued are at the heart of shaping *Shi'a* identity and communal sense. The moral allegory of the battle has developed into a cultural fixation centered around Ashura rituals, coloring all parts of *Shi'a* life: religious, social, cultural and political. The Battle of Karbala is the most important symbolic event for *Shi'a*...the battle serves as a religious model behavior among *Shi'a*, who are expected to struggle to follow the footsteps of Hussain onto the path of divinity in the face of oppression and persecution from the *Sunni* rulers. The vast majority of distinctly *Shi'a* rituals are derived from the events that took place in the Battle of Karbala."

On the origin and devotion of *Shi'a* Muharram rituals, Pinault [14] opined that "essentials to any understanding of Shiite Islam is an acquaintance with the event of A.D. 680 (the year 61 in the *hijri* or Islamic calendar) at the Battle of Karbala. What follows is a sketch of the actions of and historical figures; that plays a prominent role in the Shiite denotations and connotations today." Ayoub [28] further discusses that, in the forlorn desert of Karbala, located near the Euphrates in Southern Iraq, Hussain and his followers, numbering, according to tradition, 72 faithful along with their women and children, were surrounded by thousands of Yazid's troops. During the standoff that ensued Yazid's troops taunted and insulted Hussain and his followers and refused them access to water and food, until Hussain openly pledged his allegiance to the *Caliph*. In the course of the first 10 days of the month of Muharram, Hussain pleaded for food and water for the innocent children, but was adamant in his rejection of Yazid. On the 10th day of the month of Muharram, Hussain's compatriots were killed one by one in the bloody combat, with Hussain being the last to be martyred. This 10th day of the month of Muharram is known as Ashura.

Nakash [29] opines that "since the Battle of Karbala, five major rituals developed including the memorial services (*majales al-taz'iyah*), the visitation of Hussain's tomb in Karbala particularly on the occasion of the 10th day of the month of Muharram (Ashura) and the 40th day after the battle (*ziyarat Ashura and ziyarat arba'in*), the public mourning processions (*al-mawakib al-Hussainiyya*), the representation of the battle of Karbala in the form of a play (*tashabih*) and the self-flagellation (*zangeel and tatbir*). Within these major rituals are the rituals of chest beating (*latm*), recitation of Karbala narratives (*qira'ah*) by a *qari* or *khateeb* and *niyahah* (recitation of rhythmic lamentation poetry)." In this reference Chelkowski [30] states that "all, or some, of these rituals are performed among different *Shi'a* communities worldwide during the Karbala commemorations. In fact, there are some *Shi'a* communities that have elaborated these rituals and developed new ones altogether. Some examples of regional rituals not universal to all *Shi'a* are the use of the *zangeel* striking the body with swinging chains linked together at one end, practiced mostly in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, India and Pakistan, chest beating while holding razor blades between the fingers (practiced among the *Shi'a* of South Asia) and *tatbir* (striking the skull with a sword, practiced in Iraq and Lebanon)." Elbadri [23] opines that the development of the Ashura rituals and their evolution throughout history were influenced by the socio-political changes in the society. The memorial services and the visitation of Hussain's tomb were the oldest vehicles for invoking the memory of Karbala and reinforcing *Shi'a* collective memory." Hegland [13] asserts that "the *Shi'a* have become well-known on the world stage through the 1978-79

Iranian Revolution and the subsequent creation of the Islamic Republic. Iran is the only nation where *Shi'a* form the political majority and control the government. Estimates of the Pakistani *Shi'a* population vary according to the source. A reasonable estimate is 15-20 percent of the total population, constituting almost a hundred million." In this context Nasr [31] asserts that "more tangibly, the Iranian Revolution provided South Asia *Shi'a* with a strong source of support in the face of *Sunni* challenges to their sociopolitical standing...the Iranian revolution introduced new forms of sociopolitical organization, leadership and activism to South Asia *Shi'ism*."

Hegland [13] asserts that the flourishing Muharram rituals were connected to a growing sense of *Shi'a* identity internationally and the desire of *Shi'a*-a minority in Pakistan-for a cohesive network to defend *Shi'a* interests. Further, Hegland [13] adds that, men and women attended *Shi'a* rituals outside their own neighborhoods and even traveled to other villages or towns for *majales*. Particularly noteworthy was the crossing of ethnic lines among those who attended *majales*. "At a home *majles*, the gathered women and girls sang *marsia* (elegy/lamentation songs), listened to a female preacher outline their obligations as pious Muslim women and recite the Karbala tragedy, beat their chests in grief while chanting *noha* (mourning couplets) and prayed [10-12].

Performance of Ashura Rituals at Imambargah Hussainiya: From the first day of the Muharram *majles* rituals, the *zakir* or *alim-e-din* narrates the reasons of the Journey of Imam Hussain towards the Karbala. The narrators also speak parallel on the *fazails* (miracle) associated with Imams. As the days progress, the sermons also grow intense and inspire devotees to lament through *majles*. Most of the *Shi'a*, during *majales* are crying in the sorrow and beat their chest while listening to the *masyeb* (miseries of Hussain and their followers). The narrator who aggravates the situation more, gains more respect. The *majales* reach their peak by the 5th of Muharram, as the death narrations start.

The Muharram rituals have been producing social cohesion among villagers. By these rituals they have to work in a group form. The Management Committee itself is a good example of the group work as all the members are nominated or selected from all the ethnic sections of the village including working class. They work in collaboration to organize these activities. One great example is seen as the same committee which works for the Muharram, set the foundations for religious seminary in village. Other projects on which they are working are expansion of the main Mosque and Imambargah. They collect money through announcements made in Mosque; in addition to this they also accept in-kind contributions like sacrificed animal skins, trees and even jewelry. Major proportion of the collections is divided per household depending on the land acquisitions. In addition to land acquisitions salaried persons also contribute.

On seventh of Muharram, Imam Hussain and his companions were deprived of water. This incident is equally condemned here, *zakir* lament people through their sermons while narrating the nature of the incident. To commemorate this incident, *Shi'a* arrange procession across the country. One of the major processions is organized in the Jhang City. The *Deobandi-Shi'a* conflict from last three decades is one of the main hurdle for the participants of the processions in Jhang. But the participants devotedly not only attend the processions but also perform the related rituals.

From the seventh of Muharram, many devotees perform rituals of the day like keeping their feet and heads bared. Some others use locally speaking *zanjeer* around their body (a steel robe) as a sign of being prisoner as it happened to the Family of Imam Hussain soon after the incident of Karbala. Tenth day of Muharram is commemorated with full devotion and lamentation. Villagers spend whole night at Imambargah and perform many rituals like *amal-e-shab-e-Ashura* (prayers specific to the 10 Muharram night). At the end of this prayer session, they also pray for the revival of their sect. The day starts with the *Azan-e-Ali Akbar* at Imambargah, every year committee contract a *zakir* or *alim-e-din* for this specific *majles* (locally called *amals*) in the early morning. Those People who went to their homes last evening came back to attend this rite. In devotion and lamentation of tenth Muharram, devotees don't cook on this day at home. For food requirements for this day they depend on the *langer* and as second option, they cook by self but a day before.

Amal-e-medan or *nawafil* (a prayers session performed in a ground adjacent to the Imambargah) are among the other rituals of the day. After morning prayers people wait for some time to participate in this ritual. People move from the main

courtyard of the Imambargah toward the adjacent ground. The Imam-*masjid* leads people in the *nawafil* on male side. On female side, the mother of present Imam-*masjid* leads the *nawafil*. The *nawafil* followed by a sermon on the great sacrifice of the Family of Imam Hussain. At the end of the prayer and sermon, all devotees perform a ritual in the form of embracing and weeping; two participants embrace each other and start crying as sermon is delivered simultaneously same practice is also performed on the women side. On their return, people go straightforwardly to the Imambargah to attend *majales* of the day. The *majales* of the day followed by the *matam* and then the rituals of the *medan* (the ground, where self-flagellations and related rituals are performed).

At mid-day, male and female processions lead towards the ground, where tenth day rituals are performed. The procession starts with the *matam* in combination with *noha-khawani*. It takes about thirty minutes to reach in the ground adjacent to the graveyard for self-flagellations. The processions also keep an eye on the other procession which is lead by Waris Ali Shah, as juxtaposition of both processions is one of the pre-requisites for the commencement of self-flagellations. The other requirement is the entrance of *zuljinah*. As the procession lead by Waris Ali Shah along with *zuljinah* approaches the particular place, where other procession members are already waiting for it then the *zanjeer-zani* (self-flagellation) starts. Self-flagellations are of three major types: first, *zanjeer-zani*; second, *sar-ka-matam* (use of sharp knives for *matam* on heads); and last one is, the blade-*matam* (in which most of the children cut their chest with a sharp blade). This session of self-flagellations continues for more than an hour. During these self-flagellations the *matmi* aggravate the situation by lamenting chants. Pinault [15] asserts on the performance of the self-flagellations that, “to understand how this self-flagellation functions, it must be borne in mind that *zanjiri matam* is performed in public, not in private. It is communal, rather than individual and coordinated, not sporadic, in its performance. Its tempo is dictated by the rhythm of the *nawhajjat*, or lamentation poems, in honor of the Karbala martyrs, that are chanted as an accompaniment to the repetitive strokes of *matam*. Such ritual is ideal for the formation of group solidarity.” During the performance of self-flagellations *zuljinah* related rituals are performed in *medan*.

On their return, the participants and the spectators are served with *langar*. As the Management Committee of the Muharram rituals has already prepared a good food for the mourners (both self-flagellators and the chest-beaters), for those were doing some duties during the performance in *medan* and all others who visited Imambargah. On this day, many partisans observe fasting in the devotion of Imam Hussain and his comrades’ sacrifice. The committee has also managed food for the fasting people. In the evening, contracted *zakir* narrates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain. The distribution of *langar* outside the Imambargah continued till the evening. People eat to their fill. After the end of the rituals of the day, many of them stay at Imambargah and others return to their homes. After some time they return to participate in the rituals of *Sham-e-Gharebyn* (as this evening is commemorated every year). This event reveals the miseries of the Family of Hussain at Karbala soon after the death of Hussain and companions.

CONCLUSION

The early schism occurred in Muslim community in Arab world impacted to the origin of the sub-branches of Islam. Further, the incident of Karbala has significantly departed the Sunnis and *Shi’as*. Ashura rituals emerged out of that incident and spread all over the world with the expansion of *Shi’a* ideology. In the present locale the Ashura rituals have recent history but the lamenting nature and devotions is at best among the others. The commemoration of the Ashura rituals is not only limited to the *Shi’as* but a number of Sunni too participate in these. They also make vows during these days. The inhabitants of village Nangay Sunday actively participate in the commemorating activities. Each year, on the day of tenth Muharram, the meydan (where shia perform *matam*) represents the devotional ritual play.

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