

The Tradition of Azadari of Muharram in 'Shiraz-e-Hind' Jaunpur

- Dr. Syed Mohammed Amir

The article on Jaunpur the Shiraz e Hind and Azaadaaree has been very well written and it throws light on the unique tradition of Maatam observed by Shia Muslims on the martyrdom of Hajrat Husain and his companions. The battle of qarbla was the turning point in the history of Islam. In a treachery the Sons of Hajrat Ali, Hasan and Husain had been trapped and killed by Yazid with their 72 companions in Qarbla.

The article depicts the system and tradition of Azaadaaree in Jaunpur and the magnificent architecture of Sharqi period. Though today it is a small city near Varanasi but in Sharqi period it was one of the important seats of power in northern India.

Key words: - Shi'ism, Muharram, Azadari, Imambara, Traditions, History of Jaunpur, etc.

Jaunpur¹ (a district in the North Indian State of Uttar Pradesh), is known as the 'Shiraz of Medieval India',² bounded on the East by the district of Ghazipur and Azamgarh; on the West by the district of Pratapgarh and Allahabad; on the North by the Sultanpur district, of which a narrow strip separates it from Faizabad; on the South by the district of Mirzapur and Banaras.³ It lies between the parallels of 25° 24' and 26° 12' north latitude and between 82° 7' and 83° 5' east longitude.⁴ The district has a greatest length of 90 Km. from North to South and an extreme breadth from East to West of 85 Km. The total area, according to the survey, made between 2010-2011 was about 366.286, Square Km.⁵

This paper is an attempt in the direction of presenting facts through archeology and history about the tradition of Azadari of Muharram in a historical city and the Azakhanas situated there in. The research is also conducted through field visit and survey of the city. Thus the paper divides the findings into different parts. I have tried to juxtapose the literary description of the town with the archeological remains of the place. For our preliminary survey, this has enabled us to have an idea of the region, which has chosen for their political activities by the Tughlaqs, Sharqis and afterwards the Great Mughls through the ages. It also highlights those practices which are still prevalent from the medieval period in Jaunpur.

Jaunpur occupies a high place in the annals of Indian history for possessing a unique record of progress in oriental literature and historical traditions during the Sharqi period. It covers nearly the whole of the 15th century. For about a century, it maintained its political sovereignty as the capital of the Sharqi kingdom, which produced ambitious and resolute kings, viz.; Sultan Ibrahim Shah Sharqi (1401-1440), Sultan Mahmood Shah Sharqi (1440-1457) and Sultan Husain Shah Sharqi (1458- 1487) whose dash and pluck is evidenced by the Masjid-i-Jam-ush-Shariq, Masjid-i-Atala, and Masjid-i-Lal Darwaza.

It is needless to say that the buildings of Jaunpur equally commemorate the Sharqi rule. The magnificent forts, palaces, tombs, mosques, khanqahas, azakhanas and imambaras are perhaps among some of the most striking specimen of the high stage of architectural development to which the Islamic architecture had reached in India. These beautiful buildings display an architectural class of its own that had acquired a nomenclature of itself, the Jaunpur style of architecture.⁶

Though they built these magnificent monuments over the site of old and ruined temples and for this action of theirs, they have incurred the odium of history, but their worst critics have to confess that they proved themselves to be greater builders than destroyers. No such justification, however, exists in the case of Sikandar Lodi (1489-1517) who stepped into the shoes of Sharqi kings.

This great city of architectural achievement witnessed its political disintegration and cultural degradation at that time, when Sikandar Lodi (1489- 1517) defeated Husain Shah Sharqi (1458- 1487), the last ruler of Sharqi line.⁷ He broke its sovereignty and finally annexed Jaunpur Kingdom to the Delhi Sultanate in 1494.⁸ During the six month stay of Sikandar Lodi at Jaunpur, a reign of terror was let loose which sounded the death-knell for the cultural and artistic grandeur of Jaunpur. During this period, he employed himself in destroying all the traces of Sharqi rule, razing to the ground the elegant palaces of the Sharqi kings, their graceful gardens, magnificent azakhanas, lofty imambaras and

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everything connected with their names in order to demonstrate his control of the Sharqi kingdom.

Having demolished the forts, palaces and other secular buildings, Sikandar Lodi began to destroy the Sharqi mosques, though he himself was a model of Muslim refinement. Finally, the city of the Clergy (Ulema) prevented him from further sacrilege of the mosques.⁹ What we get to see today in Jaunpur, is only a fraction of the monument erected by the proud Sharqis. Even after such a great loss of artistic grandeur, Shahjahan, the Mughl Emperor, (1628-1657) honoured Jaunpur with the Epithet of Shiraz-i-Hind due to its literary & artistic achievements through the ages.¹⁰

The city of Jaunpur in the Eastern part of Northern India in, what is today, the state of Uttar Pradesh has far centuries been one of the major Shiites population centers in medieval India. In Jaunpur District, the population of Shi'a is above 65,000 and it occupies second place after Lucknow in Northern Uttar Pradesh. This Shiite presence can be traced back to the 14th century foundation of Jaunpur state by the Sharqi dynasty. From the first Sharqi Sultan, Khwaja Jahan, Malik Sarwar to the last sultan, Husain Shah Sharqi, All were Azadars of Syed-ush-Shuhada, and beloved of Ahl-e-Bayt and Shiites (Asna, Ashri).¹¹

While living in Jaunpur for about a decade, I came to know about city's Muharram-liturgies and traditions of Azadari. Muharram is observed with splendid solemnity in the city and its suburbs every year. Every age brings forth a new Yazid, but resistance to tyranny as, attributed by Husain's Legendry example, is incumbent upon every man of faith. No wonder his followers and azadars rally round him year after year to share his family's pain, anguish and trauma in the city.¹² The great poet, Allama Iqbal had sent forth the following message:

'Nikal kar Khanqahon se ada kar rasm-i-Shabbiri'
'Tu fakhr-i-Khanqahi hai, faqat andoh-i-dilgiri'
(Emerge from the confines of the Khanqahs and,
Re-enact the example set by Husain).

The parties of breast-beaters, the bands of Nauha, (i.e., versified expressions of sorrow for a departed soul) annual condolence meetings and processions organizations of volunteers can easily be seen in Jaunpur throughout the holy month of Muharram. Employing the paradigms of Husain and Karbala, As Maulana Mohamed Ali Jauhar said; 'Qatl-i-Husain asal me marg-i-Yazid hai Islam zinda hota hai har Karbala ke bad' (Husain's assassination is 'in truth' the death of Yazid, Islam revives after every battle of Karbala).¹³

The tradition of Azadari started in Jaunpur right from the beginning of its foundation in 1360 by Sultan Feroz Shah Tughlaq (1351-1388). A large number of azakhana were established at different places. Hazrat Maulana Makhdoom Syed Ali Naseer, the resident of Mohalla Naseer khan alias Chhatright, constructed an azakhana in the year of 1371 A.D which is still survived but in a very poor-condition. This was the first azakhana of Jaunpur.¹⁴ The second historical azakhana was constructed by Fatima Bibi A Bahwa Begum, One of the descendants of Maulana Nasir Ali. The land was given for the construction by Shahzada Nasiruddin Mahmood Tughlaq. It is also survived now known as- Imambara-Dallan.¹⁵

During the Sharqi period, the tradition of Azadari had, established well and got honour in Jaunpur. They (Sharqi Sultans) paid personal attention and took it as their religious duty to organize 'Majlis-e-Aza, in their palaces. Though Khwaja Jahan, 'Malik-ush-Sharq' did not erect any azakhana but always participated in the Majlis-e-Aza personally and contributed for the congregations annually, from the Royal treasury.

Ibrahim Shah Sharqi (1400-1440 A.D) the most successful ruler of Sharqi dynasty, had erected a magnificent azakhana which was known as Khanqah-Nuhagaran during his period. Now it is adjacent to Bari masjid (Jami-i-ush-Sharq) and Tazias (Replica of Husain's Tomb) are kept over his grave according to his last wish. His son Syed Mahmood Shah Sharqi (1440-1457 A.D) erected an azakhana in the Mohalla Begum Gunj, which had central position among the other azakhana of the city due to its architectural beauty.¹⁶ Sikandar Lodi had demolished some of its part during his invasion, Now at the same place, there is Sadar Imambara, (Muharram functions sanctuary), to have the

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memory of Sultan Mahmood. The remains are still visible of that magnificent building, which reminds the royal support.

The beloved wife of Sultan Mahmood Shah, Malika Raje Bibi also built a beautiful mosque; adjacent to it, one azakhana and one khanqah in Jaunpur. Maulana Syed Ali Daud was made the sole incharge of these buildings. The last ruler of Sharqi dynasty, Husain Shah Sharqi expanded the Area of Nuhagaran, (Sadar Imambara of Ibrahim Shah). He also built a magnificent mosque; 'Jam-i-ush Sharq' which remained the seat of azadari for a long time but by the malicious efforts of Maulvi Karamat Ali of Jaunpur, the tradition of Azadari was banned by the British Authorities for some time.¹⁷

During Akbar's period, Munim Khan Khan-i-Khanan, became the Governor of Jaunpur (1567- 76), An Administrator of great ability. He erected a mosque and Khanqah-Zikran in Katghra. Azadari became very popular & Jaunpur again became the center of Azadari. It is also noticeable that one, Syed Ahsan Akhwind Meer, who was an army officer of Shah Tahmasp of Iran, had come India with Humayun and finally settled in Jaunpur, there, he erected a number of azakhanas and arranged procession of 'Zul-Jinnah' during azadari days according to the Iranian tradition in the month of Muharram.¹⁸ Raja Idarat Jahan, the administrator of Jaunpur, during modern period, belonged as his genealogy shows, to the ancestral line of Syed Ahsan Akhwind Meer also built a mosque and azakhana which is still survived and in good-condition. The first martyr of the revolt of 1857 in Jaunpur was one azadar-i-Husain. This giant was Raja Idarat Jahan. His grandson, Zulfeqar Jahan takes part into the Majlis liturgies and lamentation rituals even after his old age.¹⁹

'In a distant age and climate the tragic scene of the death of Imam Husain will surely awaken the sympathy of the coldest reader.'

'Edward Gibbon'
(The decline and fall of the Roman Empire)

So far as the tradition of Azadari and its importance is concerned, it can be best understand through Jafri times, (Jafri Observer), a Shiite newspaper, published from Bombay that circulates widely in Jaunpur and its suburbs. It states about azadari in its 'special Muharram issue' in a very simple manner, "Imam Husain's objective was to reform the condition of society and re-establish the forsaken laws of Islam, so we can not claim to be a true-Azadar, (mourner) if we neglect our obligatory-duties, such as Namaz (Quranically mandated Prayer) fasting, kindness towards one's parents and love for humanity etc, and indulge in forbidden acts such as listening to music, watching obscene film and waisting time in gossips etc.²⁰ Thus it laid more and more emphasis upon the spiritual significance of azadari during the holy month of Muharram.

Azadari is a congregational protest against the brutal atrocities inflicted on the Godly members of Holy Prophet as revenge against Islam itself. Majlis-i-Aza is organized with its full swing as Sunnat-i-Zainabi.²¹ Every evening is the 'Sham-i-Ghriban' (the night of mourning) for every Shiite of Jaunpur. Asking about the significance of Azadari, Dr. Syed Wasi Ahmad Kazmi, (Lecturer, Mukteshwar Prasad Degree College, Jaunpur) told me in an Interview that, Husain's voluntary death in the battle-ground of Karbala, shows us, "it's better to hurt ourselves than hurt others". His martyrdom gives the example of the great sacrifice for the cause of goodness for humanity. Through the act of mourning and self-mortification, we hurt ourselves".

Matam typically designates observances performed during Muharram in honour of Husain and other martyrs of Karbala. More specially, the term denotes the striking of oneself either with the bare-hand (as indicated by the Persian term Sineh-Zani, Chest beating) or with some weapon or frail (as for example in the scourging known as Zanjir-Zani) in an act of ritual mourning. The people of Jaunpur take part during the Matam in their Azakhanas from the 1st day of Muharram to Ashura, The 10th of Muharram. During the month of Muharram, Matam, for Hussain, According to Syed Haider Abbas, one of the prominent Shiias of Jaunpur, is a matter of extra- ordinary importance in the eyes of Allah otherwise he would not have made his entire creature to weep according to their own natural forms. In my support, we may quote a strong justification, of Syed Mohammad Ameen, who cites traditions to the effect that entire cosmos participated in bewailing Hussain's death at Karbala. In Ameen's Interpretation-'God caused these actions (weeping and wailing) to be manifested in the world in order to make clear to us humans the

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overriding importance of remembering Husain and of commemorating his death in mourning.²²

It is also noteworthy that Shiite Muslims are not alone in honouring Husain during Muharram. Various Sunni Muslims & Hindu communities also participated to some extent in these commemorations & processions of azadari, Particularly on Ashura, the tenth of the month of Muharram. Thousand of mourners march through the streets of Jaunpur towards Karbala (Sadar-Imambara) at Pandareeba.²³ This is the sound evidence of our secular traditions and the best of example of communal harmony in the suburbs of Jaunpur.

History is the Historian's experience, as it is said; it is my personal experience to visit to the azakhana of Nazim Ali Khan of Nasib Khan Mandi, in Jaunpur. Even today, Majlis-i-Aza was organized from the very first day of Muharram since his time. This tradition is still survived. A special Zakir (a preacher) was arranged for Zikr; the Majlis typically begins with a marsiyeh (a lamentation chant in the honour of Karbala), the reciting of funeral laments by a chores of some half dozen men. A sermon is then given by a Zakir. The structure of the sermon is fixed according to the tradition; Invocation of God's blessing and praise of the Prophet's family; Faza'il description of the merits of the martyrs of Karbala with reflections on hour- their virtues may guide our conduct today; Masa'ib, evocation of the sufferings endured by the martyrs and the rapacious cruelty of their persecutors till by the conclusion of the masa'ib-virtually, all are crying, slapping their thighs or heads or concealing their faces with handkerchief as they sob. At this juncture the sermon of the Zakir will end. This Majlis was arranged by Ali Zaamin Khan, the Grandson of Nazim Ali Khan. Tradition of Azadari is still prevalent in his generation even after the decline of heydays.

Generally speaking, Majlis-e-Aza during the month of Muharram are mainly divided into five sections (1) Sozkhani, (ii) Salam, (iii) Mercia- Khani, (iv) Religious discourse and (v) Noha. Soz (Short poems in Urdu in Praise of Prophet Mohammad and his descendants) are sung by the speaker or Zakir of the Majlis, which is generally followed by Salam. Minimum one soz and one Salam are sung which lasts for at least 15 minutes. There- after elegies which narrated the tragic event is sung which is known as Mercia- Khani. While the Zakir sings Mercia, most of the listeners or mourners broke into tears. This practice lasts for another 10 to 15 minutes and is followed by religious discourse. The religious deliberation is itself consisted of two parts. Ist part is consisted of general discussion or various theological issues of Islam and 2nd part is meant to express grief or to more- over the events of Karbala. Majlis ends with the singing of nohas (lamentations in poetry form composed for the martyrs of Karbala). In this practice, mourners stand up at least for 10 to 20 minutes and beat their breasts (only males) while singing nuhas.²⁴ The religious meeting generally disperse with the distribution of eatables (Tabarruk) which is considered to be very pious and taken as the blessing of beloved master Hazrat Ali.

The special majlises (Majalis) are arranged on the 10th day called 'Shura' (Yaum-i-Aushoora)²⁵ when Imam Husain was slain in the battle of Karbala with his 72 companions, on A.D. 680.²² This starts early in the morning. On the same day, there is a large gathering here in Jaunpur when Tazias from the city and surroundings villages are brought to be buried. Nearly thousands pilgrims visit Karbala, adjacent to Sadar Imambara, near Mufti Mohalla on the Malhani Road²⁶. Numerically Shiites comprise only a small percentage of Jaunpur's population; but they are a highly visible minority in part because of their continued customs of gathering for mass- liturgical displays of azadari at Muharram.

During survey, I found more than hundred azakhanas in Jaunpur, Tazias are kept in these places. Thus the tradition of Azadari has been deep rooted in the social life of the city and it also has its impact on social customs and practices, in general. Thus Jaunpur, a historical city retained its historical traditions and has not lost its secular identity through the Ages. The young generation still valued its historical traditions of azadari besides western impact. They know the spiritual strength of religious liturgies and practices of Muharram more than anything else.

Every Shiite home in Jaunpur, Dr. Sadiq Naqvi, (Shia Degree College, Jaunpur) asserted in conversation with me, becomes an Ashurkhana during Muharram. Ten days of mourning (Ashura) culminate the final mournful tribute to the lord of the Martyrs. Cries of

Wa Mohammada Kushta Shud Husain (Oh, Muhammad, Husain has been martyred), rend in the air. In the stillness of the night, hear the following heart-rending lament; "When the caravan of Medina, having lost all arrived in captivity in the vicinity of Sham Foremost came the head of Husain, born aloft on a spear and in its wake, a band of women, with heads bared." 27

Thus Azadari (mourning) by the Shiites is mainly for the heartless and in human treatment inflicted on the holy ones by those who, professing themselves to be Muslims have caused such shameful and disgraceful blots on the pages of the history of the conduct and character of man on earth, that it can never be erased and for which every member of the human family will certainly be unceasingly grieved, and will be ever cursing the brutes in the human forms until the end of the world.²⁸ But one fact remains, there never was a Husain before him, there has been none after him. It is more than fourteen centuries and Husain is still the source of inspiration for the whole humanity at large. In this way, Azadari teaches us emulating the generosity and the spirit of giving that Imam Husain is renowned for. In Karbala, Imam Husain and his household gave away everything in the cause of Allah. So, azadari for Imam Husain entails going beyond mere ritualism into the very spirit and purpose of life. It should lead to a better and vibrant community and lift it to greater heights. It also teaches us to "Live like Ali and die like Husain" every day for "Every day is Ashura and every land Karbala", forever.

An Urdu poet captures this in these lines;
'Waqt ke saylab me har khushko tari beh jayega, magar sirf name Husain reh jayega.'

(In the flood of time every dry and wet thing will flow away, yet the name of Husain shall live forever).

As Sarojini Naidu exhorts, thus in the following line--

Black robed, barefooted, with dim eyes that rain
Wild tears in memory of thy woeful plight,
And hands that in blind, rhythmic anguish smite
Their bloodstained bosoms to sad refrain
Thy votaries mourn thee through the tragic night
With mystic dirge and melancholy rite,
Crying to thee- Husain! Husain!
Why do thy myriad lovers so lament?
Sweet saints, is not thy matchless martyr hood
The living banner and brave covenant
Of the high creed thy Prophet did proclaim,
Bequeathing for the world's beautitude
Th' enduring loveliness of Allah's name? 29

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- 2- Shahjahan, the Mughl Emperor honored Jaunpur with the Epithet of 'Shiraz-i-Hind' (Shiraz of India) due to its literary & Artistic achievements through the ages, Ikram, Sheikh Mohammad, 'Aab-i-Kausar', Delhi, 1952, p. 508, Ahmad, Syed Iqbal, 'Tarikh-i-Salateen-i-Sharqi-Wa-Sufia-i-Jaunpur, 1988, pp.35-37. Qazi, Azhar Mubarakpuri, 'Dayar-i-Purab Mien Ilm Aur Ulema', Lucknow, 1979, p. 81, Bilgrami, Ghulam Ali Azad, 'Ma'asir-ul-Kiram, Vol. 1. Hyderabad, p.221.
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- 11- Husain, Muzaffar, 'History of Azadari of Muharram in Jaunpur, Allahabad, 1927, p. 9.
- 12- Mushirul Hasan, 'Making Sense of History, Society, Culture and Politics', New Delhi, 2003, pp. 136-7.
- 13- Siddiqi, Zaheer Ali, 'Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar Aur Jang-i-Azadi' (Urdu), (1998), Rampur Raza Library, Hamid Manzil, Rampur, pp. 220-21. Maulana Mohamed Ali Jauhar (1878-1931), one of the founders of Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi and its first Vice-Chancellor (1920-23) was a nationalist leader, freedom fighter and Khilafat Leader during Non-Cooperation & Khilafat Movement in India. He was elected as the President of the Indian National Congress in 1923 and took part in the Round Table Conference at London. He was an influential journalist and a good poet also.
- 14- Op.cit, p.21.' History of Azadari of Muharram in Jaunpur'.
- 15- Ibid; pp. 21-22.
- 16- Ibid; pp. 22-25.
- 17- Beg, Mirza Abbas Ali, 'Jaunpurnama', (Urdu), Husaini Mission, Lucknow, 1987, p. 87.
- 18- Ibid; pp. 42-45.
- 19- Ibid; pp.50-53.
- 20- Kareemi, Mohammed Raza, 'The Importance of Mourning' special number on "Azadari" Jafri Times, (Jafri Observer), Aug-Sept. Bombay, 1988, p. 13.
- 21- 'Majlis-i-Aza' is 'Sunnat-i-Zainabi' which was started to practice by 'Hazrat Zainab' after the release from the jail of Damascus. She belonged to Prophet's family and was the daughter of Hazrat Ali. She suffered a lot at Sham, Karbala & Kufa and got martyrdom at Damascus. This practice (Maja'lis) was told by Imam Masoom that this is the duty of every Muslim to follow the Sunnat-i-Zainabi to remember the pains of Imam Husain & Ahl-i-bayt at Karbala. She was Husain's younger sister who accompanied him from Medina to Karbala. After the debacle, she bravely acted as the leaders of the survivors of the Karbala & eloquently echoed as the voice of Karbala's atrocities and to disclose the real face & unjust character of Yazid. Ahmad Ali, Meer S.V, 'The Souvenir of Islam' Tarikh-i-Tarseel-i-Qur'an, New York, 1991, p. 235. Khan, Nawab Sheikh Ahmad Husain, 'Falsafa-i-Shahadat' (Philosophy of Martyrdom), Asrar-i-Qadeem publication, Allahabad, pp14-15.
- 22- Ameer, Syed Mohammad, 'The Importance of Crying and Weeping', Karachi, 1973, pp. 7-10.
- 23- This Imambara is situated in Jagdishpur Village at the end of the North-Eastern part of the city, Jaunpur. It has a huge gate with a few religious buildings inside the campus. Among them, Qadam Rasool & Rau'za Hazrat Abbas are worth mentioning from architectural point of view. This was built by Sheikh Fateh Muhammad alias Mangli Mian at the time of Muhammad Shah, (1719-1739), the Mughl Emperor. Mangli Mian was the Risaladar (Commander) of the Nazim (Administrator) of Allahabad. (Fasihuddin, Maulvi Mohammad. 'The History of Sharqi Monuments in Jaunpur', 1922, Badaun, p. 670).
- 24- Male & female only take part in the Majlis in the Imambara but a black curtain gets partitioned between them. Female only hear the voice of the preacher (Zakir). Matam is (Sineh-Zani) only performed by men.
- 25- All the lights of the Imambara are switched off as a sign of lamentation and grief in this Majlis. People only wear black suits in the Imambara.
- 26- Procession (Julus) of Tazias (replica) reaches at Karbala with a huge crowd. The traffic of the Jaunpur city and its suburbs are stopped or diverted to other routes for a period of four or five hours from 3 p.m. to 8 p.m.
- 27- Mushirul Hasan, 'Making Sense of History, Society, Culture and Politics', New Delhi, 2003, p. 139.
- 28- Ahmad Ali, Meer S.V, 'The Souvenir of Islam', Tarikh-i-Tarseel-i-Qur'an, New York, 1991, p. 235-36.



(Map of Jaunpur City locating its boundaries)