

Media, Citizenship, and Religious Mobilization: The Muharram Awareness Campaign in Mumbai

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The great urban diversity of Mumbai has given rise to a range of religious mobilizations that are not only shaped by a history of communalism along religious lines but also driven by intra-religious rivalry and competition in their urban environment. Against the backdrop of a global megacity, contemporary Shi'ite religious activism in Mumbai provides evidence of the importance of global processes of religious mobilization, while also showing its entanglement with state regulation of religion. An advertising campaign by a Shi'ite media center illustrates that such religious activism with global ramifications can only be understood if one also takes its intersection with state-sponsored regimes of religious diversity into account. Media practices of Indian Muslims as a vulnerable minority are especially responsive to normative discourses and images of religious diversity, and mobilize alternative strands of Indian secularism in order to counteract the fragility of their citizenship.

IN THIS ARTICLE, I am concerned with media-based religious activism among Shi'ite Muslims in Mumbai. Having long been a metaphor for modern India (Patel and Thorner 1996), Mumbai is also the Indian urban environment most deserving of the designation “global city” (Sassen 2001), and a setting where the global and national dimensions of religious mobilizations intersect most visibly. At the same time, the great urban diversity that is characteristic of Mumbai brings to mind not only the well-studied dynamics of communalism based on religious lines but also intra-Muslim debates and sectarianism. It is the latter aspect I am interested in here, as internal competition and antagonism profoundly shape media practices that have religious propagation as a goal, while simultaneously aiming to present Muslims as respectable citizens to a wider public in a national context where Muslims have been subject to severe marginalization and exclusion. My analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Mumbai carried out between 2005 and 2013, presenting a perspective from both Shi'ite activists as well as ordinary Shi'ite Muslims in everyday settings.

Among scholars of religion, the global dimensions of religious activism have recently emerged as a main focus of attention. Rejecting earlier approaches that primarily conceived of contemporary religious mobilizations as a defensive reaction against the onslaughts of globalization, such as in the study of so-called “fundamentalism” (Habermas 2003, 32; see also Castells 2004), anthropologists have assigned religion a much more active role in driving global processes (Rudnyckj 2009). In accounting for the heightened visibility and rapid spread of certain religious traditions and forms of

activism in the contemporary world, some scholars have pointed to the parallels between the center-periphery structures of the globalizing world and particular religious cosmologies. These involve an isomorphism between desires among many people on the global periphery for links and possibilities to travel to the centers of the globalizing world and their wishes to connect to a religious otherworld envisioned to be far superior to the world they presently find themselves in (Robbins 2009).

Media infrastructures are another main link between globalization and religious mobilization. A key observation on contemporary religious activism in the world today is that religious mobilizations use modes of circulation and interaction characteristic of modern public spheres, such as stranger sociability and the techniques and mechanisms of circulating images and discourse connected to them (Larkin 2008; Meyer and Moors 2006). The central importance of media practices in contemporary religious activism has also resulted in renewed attention to what some have called the intrinsic links between religion and media. Scholars inspired by such a “media turn” (Engelke 2010) in the study of religion investigate religion as a process of interaction between religious practitioners and a religious otherworld, however conceived, where media with their technical and material aspects provide the essential infrastructure for making such interactions possible (Hirschkind 2006; Meyer 2009; Schulz 2006; Stolorow 2005). While from such a perspective religion is generally inseparable from media, the spread of new global media infrastructures has had a major impact on the forms and intensity of religious activism, especially the salience of religion in the public sphere (Eisenlohr 2009, 2012). Nowhere do such media-driven modern forms of religious activism appear as significant as in global megacities, where the integration of everyday life with global media infrastructures seems to be most far reaching. Present-day forms of religious mobilization often come forward from urban conditions, such as the dense spaces of public visibility, intense urban soundscapes, the availability of modern education, as well as the media infrastructures that circulate images and discourse in transnational publics (Burchardt and Becci 2013; Coleman 2009; Oosterbaan 2010).

It is tempting to bring these insights to bear on religious activism in the most globalized of all Indian megacities, Mumbai. Nevertheless, while it is important to pay attention to the global dimensions of religious mobilizations, including the nexus between media and religion, it is also crucial not to lose sight of the enduring importance of national regimes of regulating religion, as they also shape religious mobilizations, including their public sphere dimensions. Only an investigation of the interaction between the global and national dimensions of religious mobilizations can give us a more accurate account of religion in the public sphere today. This point is also of great relevance for the topic I am addressing in this paper, Muslim religious activism in an Indian megacity. As much as the media infrastructures and long-distance religious networks involved in the activism I will discuss testify to the centrality of the global dimensions of religious activism today, one cannot adequately analyze such mobilizations without taking the position of Muslims as a marginal religious minority in India into account, nor is it possible to ignore the imprint of the specifically Indian traditions of regulating relationships between religious communities, religious institutions, and the state.¹

¹For a related argument about the importance of the national context for contemporary transnational Shi‘ite mobilization, see Shaery-Eisenlohr (2008).

For quite some time, scholars have pointed to the importance of religious mobilizations in the cultural dynamics of colonial and postcolonial India. One strand of scholarship has sought to account for the prominence of religion in Indian nation building through pointing to a reactive engagement with the British colonizer's superiority in the military, economic, and political realms that left only culture and religion as a sovereign basis for anti-colonial nationalism (Chatterjee 1993). Also, strict post-1857 censorship geared to suppressing dissent and sedition in the print media led to political activists and emerging middle classes increasingly expressing themselves in the seemingly "traditional" modes of religious language and imagery, which drew less attention from censors (Pinney 2009). Here, there is evidence for an early interlinking between modern media practices and religious mobilizations in India that long predates the great visibility of religious imagery in the contemporary Indian public sphere following the more recent liberalization and weakening of state control over broadcast media (Rajagopal 2001). Another aspect of the colonial encounter, the selective appropriation of Orientalist scholarship by an emerging Indian bourgeoisie, and a concurrent Western fascination with Indian spirituality in an environment where religion also played a major role in European nation building (van der Veer 2001) further contributed to making religion, especially reformist Hinduism, central to Indian politics and national imaginations.

The rise of communalism has been shown to be tightly linked to such transformations in the colonial public sphere. From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, religious festivals and processions turned into ways of claiming public space and recognition for emerging "communities," fusing them with new forms of political activism (Freitag 1989; van der Veer 1994). Also here, the colonizer played a key role in constructing and delineating religious communities, as well as religious majorities and minorities, through the census and other administrative measures (Cohn 1987; Pandey 2006), a process also displaying the intimate relationship of communalism and the discourse of caste (Adcock 2014, 14–16; D. Menon 2007). A main emphasis in this strand of scholarship has been the emergence of a Hindu-Muslim antagonism (Brass 1974, 2003; Hasan 1996; Pandey 1999, 2006).

The problematic of communalism has remained a guiding theme in the literature on Indian Muslims, as they have been subject to severe marginalization and recurring episodes of violence in postcolonial India (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2012; Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Hansen 2007). Seeking to counteract Hindu nationalist portrayals of Muslims as foreigners and enemies of the nation, scholars working on Muslims in India have emphasized the distance that modern reformist movements have kept from the politics of communalism (Metcalf 1993; Sikand 2006), or have sought to underline the indigenous credentials of vernacular Islam in India (Imtiaz Ahmad 1981; Ahmad and Reifeld 2004; Flueckiger 2006). The latter approach runs the danger of conforming to a nationalist discourse according to which Sufist and shrine-based "syncretic" Islamic practice is proper to India, while traditions of reformist Islamic purification are implicitly placed outside the boundaries of the nation despite their centuries-long presence within the boundaries of present-day India (N. Menon 2014; Metcalf 2005; see also Das 1984; F. Robinson 1983). The problematic of communalism also features prominently in the literature on Mumbai, much of which has been written under the shadow of the traumatic anti-Muslim violence of 1992–93 (Chatterji and Mehta 2007; Nilesh 2011; R. Robinson

2010). However, much less attention has been directed at intra-Muslim differences and their role in shaping public religious expression (but see Didier 2004; Mehta 2010). In this paper I focus on how sectarian antagonism and competition among Muslims in Mumbai has emerged not just as a driving force for religious mobilization but also as a force shaping the presentation of Muslim religious identities to a wider public.

SHI'ITE MUMBAI

There is no coherent “Muslim community” in Mumbai, as Muslims in the city are highly diverse. Muslim traders have played a leading role in the transformation of Bombay from colonial outpost to the imperial hub of the Indian Ocean. Muslim Gujarati trading communities are long-established inhabitants of the city, having spread throughout the Indian Ocean region along imperial networks. They are closely connected to the ascent of the city as an economic and financial center, and finally a global city, in which their dense networks of trade, kinship, and intermarriage as well as religious affiliation and patronage played a significant role. Competing for followers among the increasing migrant population from other parts of India, these networks also supported a vibrant shrine-based religious economy (Green 2011).

Since the nineteenth century, great numbers of North Indian Muslim migrants have settled in the city, attracted by employment possibilities in the growing textile industry that formed the industrial base of the city until the 1980s. These migrants and their descendants have long greatly outnumbered the established Muslim trading communities and tend to be very distinct in terms of not only regional and ethnic but also religious affiliation. The northern migrants are in their majority Sunni, while the trading communities are predominantly Shi'ite, each of these two broad affiliations comprising a great diversity of sects and Islamic traditions. Even after the collapse of the textile industry, the northern Muslim migration has continued to this day.

Muslims in the city, especially poorer Muslims of migrant origin, have suffered from the marginalization and discrimination that Muslims have been subjected to since 1947. A key event was the violence in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992 by Hindu nationalists, which provoked unrest and riots across the country, including Bombay, where organized attacks in January 1993 killed more than 1,000 Muslims, injuring many more (Hansen 2001b; Masselos 1994). Many Muslims lost their homes and businesses through destruction or expulsion, and an estimated 250,000 Muslims fled the violence and moved to areas with a Muslim majority, most of them permanently. This trend towards ghettoization was further propelled by the March 1993 bombings that killed around 300 victims, mainly in the city's business district and other locations in the city. They were widely considered to be the work of the quasi-mythical Dubai- and Karachi-based gangster Dawood Ibrahim and commonly regarded as retaliatory killings for the anti-Muslim violence several weeks before (Rao 2007). The city's Muslims have since been treated as a security problem by the authorities, a process further intensified by the 2006 suburban train bombings and the spectacular November 2008 terrorist attacks on some of the city's best-known landmarks, for which Pakistan-based militants were responsible. In addition to suffering the effects of a securitization policy, with the exception of the Dawoodi Bohras, Muslims in Mumbai

have also been marginalized in the intense struggles and competition for housing and urban space that the city has become notorious for in the academic and nonacademic literature (Appadurai 2000). Negative stereotypes of Muslims among Hindu middle classes further contribute to Muslim ghettoization and exclusion, as in their imagination Muslim neighborhoods are frequently associated with terrorism and organized crime.

To date, research on Muslims in Mumbai has focused on how Muslims have struggled and tried to come to terms with the effects of traumatic violence and severe socioeconomic and spatial exclusion, frequently with a focus on Muslim women (Chatterji and Mehta 2007; Contractor 2012; Khan 2007; Nilesh 2011; Rajan, Dhanraj, and Lalita 2011; R. Robinson 2010). As an attempt to “provincialize the global city” (Varma 2004), the renaming of Bombay as Mumbai in 1995 initiated by the Hindu nationalist and regional chauvinist party Shiv Sena (Hansen 2001b) was also aimed at erasing the significant role that cosmopolitan Muslim networks had played in the rise of the city. Followers of the Shiv Sena were among the main perpetrators of the anti-Muslim violence of 1993. Nevertheless, the huge impact of violence, ghettoization, and securitization policies on the lives of most Mumbai Muslims does not always play a prominent role in the internal debates about religious authority, morality, and the aspirations that bring many Muslims to Mumbai, and shape their lives in the city (Hansen 2001a, 2001b). Against the background of most of the literature on Muslims in Mumbai, and the literature on communalism in India more broadly, one of the surprising findings is that the shadow of a threatening Hindu other does not always loom large in such intra-Muslim debates. Instead, Muslims often seem to be more concerned about deepening sectarianism and antagonism and contesting claims of religious and moral authority within what many typically describe as a “Muslim community.”

In my field research, many interactions I had with Shi‘ites in Mumbai underlined this dynamic. Instead of identifying themselves and positioning their aspirations against a Hindu other, as much of the scholarship on communalism would lead one to assume, my interlocutors were much more concerned about intra-Muslim sectarianism and felt threatened by what they regarded as troubling anti-Shi‘ite campaigns by several Sunni groups and actors they referred to with the term “Wahhabi.”² With this they meant not only actual Wahhabi or Salafi-affiliated Muslims and representatives of the Indian movements connected to them, such as the Ahl-e Hadith, but often also other more reformist and purist Deoband-affiliated Sunnis, such as the Tablighi Jama‘at, who are known for their rejection of Shi‘ism. While this antagonism certainly testifies to the global aspects of contemporary Muslim politics (compare Zaman 1998, Nasr 2006), there was also a distinctly Indian dimension in my interlocutors’ worries.³ Some of

²Arshad Alam (2008) has made a related point, stressing that in North Indian madrasa education Hindus do not feature as the main other. Instead, Muslims with different doctrinarian and sectarian affiliations fulfill that role.

³Justin Jones, too, has pointed to the Indian dimensions of Shi‘a-Sunni sectarianism, documenting how since the late nineteenth century the rise of sectarianism has also been linked to intra Shi‘ite tensions in times of upheaval and change in religious authority and organization that were particular to its Indian context. For more than a century, sectarianism in South Asia has thus also functioned as a strategy of empowerment for new actors on the rise in their challenges to the established Shi‘ite authorities of the day. Commenting on more recent manifestations of sectarianism in South Asia, Jones shifts attention away from much-commented-upon geopolitical contests in the Muslim world

them contrasted their Indian environment favorably with other parts of the Muslim world, especially Pakistan, because of the absence of specifically anti-Shi'ite violence and the religious pluralism and religious freedom in India that allow them to publicly cultivate their traditions without fear of attacks and to obtain permissions for processions and other public religious observances. Interestingly, for them the praiseworthy absence of specifically anti-Shi'ite violence and discrimination appeared to be sometimes more significant for their lives in the city than the instances of Hindu nationalist anti-Muslim violence that Shi'ites have also suffered from.⁴ According to a teacher in a school catering to mainly Shi'ite students in a predominantly Muslim suburban slum area, sectarian differences among Muslims were on the rise and worrisome. She pointed out that "among Sunnis the Deobandis are getting stronger and stronger, especially the Tabighi Jama'at. They are very much against the Shia. They will eat with Hindus but not with the Shia." As Ahmad, a Shi'ite activist working for a religious charity organization pointed out: "The Wahhabi have killed so many Shia in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Pakistan that Shia now have to be afraid to come out and hold processions. We are proud of the freedom we have here in India." Ahmad regularly followed media coverage about Shi'ites throughout the Muslim world and also had personal contacts in the network of transnationally operating Shi'ite charities who had told him about violence and atrocities committed against Shi'ites in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Here, he drew on this knowledge to simultaneously position himself as an Indian and as a member of India's marginalized Muslim minority in a manner quite distinct from the logic of communalism as it has so far been analyzed in the scholarly literature.

The great diversity that is characteristic of Muslims in the city also applies to Shi'ites. The large majority is of North Indian origin; however, the long-established trading communities so different in class, ethnicity, and religious affiliation from the northern migrants and their descendants comprise most of the elites. Ismaelis (Nizari and Musta'li) of Gujarati background play a prominent role among the latter, such as the Dawoodi Bohras (Blank 2001) and the Khojas. Among Twelver (Ithna Ashari) Shi'ites, the Ithna Ashari Khojas, a nineteenth-century split-off from the Ismaeli Khojas⁵ who

towards continuities in the South Asian contexts since the late nineteenth century: "the possibility remains that Shi'a-Sunni conflict in various instances was, as before, simply the most visible derivative of a struggle for influence within a much-altered Shi'a community itself, manifested through changes to customary Muharram performance" (Jones 2012, 237).

⁴See also Toby Howarth's (2005, 132) observation on Twelver Shi'ites in Hyderabad: "In an overwhelmingly Hindu nation ... [Shi'a] feel the heat of a rising Hindu nationalism. At the same time, however, Shi'as often feel closer to Hindus than to Sunnis because of the antagonism between the Islamic sects and because the devotion that many Hindus show towards Hussain and Fatima." Addressing Muharram observances as a shared Hindu-Muslim focus of devotion, David Pinault (1997, 240) attributes the ecumenical appeal of public Shi'ite ritual to its "darshanic" qualities.

⁵The Ithna Ashari Khojas seceded from the larger and also wealthier Ismaeli Khoja community in the nineteenth century (Masselos 1978, 115). Comparable to other Gujarati trading communities, they have migrated throughout the Indian Ocean, noticeably East Africa, and more recently also to Great Britain and North America. The establishment of the Ithna Ashari Khojas under the influence of a cleric from Najaf, which was formalized in 1899 with the building of a separate Khoja Ithna Ashari mosque in Dongri, provoked violence, as happened during earlier processes of

are of Gujarati background and a trading community of Iranian origin known as “Mughals” whose ancestors migrated to Bombay from Persia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Masoudi Nejad 2012) play the key leadership roles. They control most Twelver Shi’ite institutions in the city, who also cater to the much greater number of Urdu-speaking Twelver Shi’ites mostly of *syed* and *ansari* caste background originally from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, especially Uttar Pradesh, which is a historical stronghold of Shi’ism in India (Cole 1989; Jones 2012). The latter are predominantly poor, but a few have also prospered in Mumbai and have built religious institutions there, adding to the diversity of religious trusts, mosques, *imambada*s, and educational and charitable institutions. Most of these institutions and the groups and families controlling them are integrated into larger transnational networks of *marja’iyya* (the Twelver Shi’ite religious establishment) centered on senior scholars known to be *marja’-e taqlid* (sources of emulation) and the religious and charitable foundations they control. In India, including Mumbai, Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf, Iraq, is clearly the most popular *marja’*; however, Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is also competing for followers through a network of trusts and foundations connected to the Iranian Shi’ite religious establishment.⁶

The beginnings of a strengthening of Shi’ite orthodox religious leadership in Mumbai can be traced to colonial policy. Local neighborhood strongmen and plebeian leaders or *dada* controlled the rituals and processions surrounding the making and carrying around of *tabut* (elaborately decorated representations of Hussain’s bier or tomb) that were the central element of the festivities of Muharram in the final decades of the nineteenth century. This was the case especially for the large processions on the tenth of that month commemorating the martyrdom of Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet, at the battle of Karbala in 680 CE, which, like in other locations in India, still is the single largest ritual event in Shi’ite Mumbai. In the aftermath of violence between rival groups during the processions, in 1913 the British colonial authorities banned the carrying around of the *tabut* through the city. Having had the characteristics of an exuberant folk festival earlier on, the character of Muharram in Bombay then changed towards an Islamic ritual of commemoration. As a consequence, the authority of Shi’ite religious leaders increased (Masselos 1976, 82; 1982, 58–60). This development

secession from the Ismaeli Khojas, such as when Sunni Khojas declared themselves a separate community in 1850 (Daftary 1992, 515). Remembered as martyrs, those among their community’s founders who lost their lives in the process have now been integrated into the larger narrative of Karbala (*Khoja Shia Isnaashari Jamaat* 1998; see also *Khoja Shia Isnaashari Jamaat*, n.d.). The outcome of these conflicts was that Khojas aligned themselves with three different forms of more standardized orthodoxy. In these intra-Khoja disputes and divisions, British colonial courts played a key role in ratifying and delineating such new boundaries (Daftary 1992, 515–16; Green 2011, 173; Masselos 1978).

⁶The contemporary dominance of *marja’* based in Iraq, and to a lesser degree in Iran, stands in sharp contrast to a period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when several prominent and influential Indian *marja’* were residing in Lucknow, and is very much a post-partition phenomenon. After partition in 1947, and the departure of the most influential and wealthiest members of the community for Pakistan and the impoverishment of much of the remaining community, especially in North India, there have been few Indian scholars holding the status of *marja’*, and there are none today (Jones 2012, 222–23).

also has to be seen in the context of a broader strengthening of Shi'ite traditional leadership and institutions in colonial India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the collapse of court patronage, especially in the wake of the British dismantling of the Shi'ite dynasty of Awadh after the rebellion of 1857, Shi'ite *'ulema* had found new ways of organizing and propagating in a manner independent from state patronage by the end of the nineteenth century. The result was a revitalization of Shi'ite religious life with new forms of religious learning, practice, and public engagement becoming prominent, while new charitable and educational institutions, volunteer movements, and publishing houses flourished in an emerging modern public sphere (Jones 2012). Indian Shi'ite institutions and religious learning entered a new period of crisis after partition in 1947, especially in North India, where many of the influential and wealthy Muslim *zamindars* and landed *sayyids* who had been the main patrons of Shi'ite institutions and public religious performance left for Pakistan and the remaining Shi'ite community became progressively impoverished (Jones 2012, 222).

However, recent decades have seen another revival of Twelver Shi'ite religious and institutional life. Especially since the Iranian revolution, the impact of standardized Twelver Shi'ism, this time more strongly connected to transnational networks of *marja'iyya*, has increased even further. Greater flows of migration, such as to the countries in the Persian Gulf (Hansen 2001a), as well as pilgrimage to the sacred sites of the Shi'ite world, have contributed to this ongoing process of standardization and orthodoxization. In its Indian setting, this process has its origins in overall religious transformations and the rise of a modern public sphere in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial India (Jones 2012),⁷ but has since been further reinforced through the global networks of a modern "Shi'i International" (Mallat 1993) since the 1960s.

Also, given the poverty and gross neglect by state institutions that shapes the lives of most Muslims in Mumbai, including Twelver Shi'ites, many have become reliant on Shi'ite institutions for coping with the challenges of everyday life. For example, religious trusts and charities such as the Al-Iman Charitable Trust (often spelled "Alimaan"), which draw on a transnational, indeed global network of support and funding, run a number of schools, orphanages, and health clinics. Very importantly, in the environment of Mumbai where housing is so scarce, expensive, and contested, the foundation also constructs housing for poorer Shi'ites and runs programs to convert hutments into *pakka* (solidly built) houses in slum areas with a large Muslim population, such as Govandi/Shivaji Nagar.

Another force that has contributed to the rise of more standardized, *marja'iyya*-based Shi'ism is media practices. These are above all the multitude of "small media," such as audio and video CDs and DVDs circulating recordings of religious processions, lectures, and performances. Among Twelver Shi'ites, the latter especially comprise recordings of devotional events known as *majlis* (plural *majalis*) where the tragic events of the battle of Karbala in 680 CE are commemorated through the reciting of mournful poetry and lament (Qureshi 1981).⁸ Those listening to such poetry ideally become transformed by profound feelings of grief and attachment for the members of the family of the

⁷See also Reetz (2006) for a discussion of Sunni activism in the public sphere.

⁸In her ethnographic research in Hyderabad, Diane D'Souza (2004) has also documented alternative devotional genres and events primarily performed by Twelver Shi'ite women.

Prophet (*ahl-al bayt*) who lost their lives during the battle, especially Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet. The vivid description and poetic rendering of their suffering and death aim to provoke outpourings of such pious emotions, a reliving of the events as if one had been present there oneself.⁹ This performative rendering of the memory of the battle and its aftermath, if done appropriately and effectively, enables a form of embodied witnessing of the tragic events that is one of the hallmarks of a pious Shi'ite Muslim (Pinault 2001; Schubel 1993). The main genres of such poetic performances are *marsiya*, *soz*, and *nauha*, which also feature very prominently on video CDs and MP3 disks circulating in Shi'ite neighborhoods of Mumbai. Such recordings are now also increasingly accessed through Internet downloads of sound and video files. Also, local cable television networks offer specifically Shi'ite devotional programs, and many now watch lectures and recordings of *majalis* at home on television. These newer media practices have allowed Shi'ite devotional performances to transcend their established temporal and spatial boundaries, so that many Shi'ites can now integrate the watching of and especially listening to such religious genres into their daily routines and activities. In recent decades, coinciding with the strengthening of institutions and networks promoting more standardized and translocal Shi'ite orthodoxy, many Shi'ites in Mumbai have shifted from listening to commercial entertainment programs and music to media with Shi'ite devotional content. But the growth of religious audiovisual media has not only gone hand in hand with a trend towards orienting oneself towards a major religious tradition but also brought about more opportunities to extend the participation roles in Shi'ite devotional events into everyday contexts. This also includes an extension into new contexts of the witnessing position that participants in Shi'ite devotional events inhabit with respect to the suffering of revered members of the *ahl-al bayt*.

MEDIA AND REGIMES OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Such uses of Shi'ite media, especially those connected to the *majlis* as a performative event, stand in a relation of continuity to older, established practices of religious mediation. But media practices also play an important role in the highly competitive field that the landscape of Islam constitutes in the city. This applies above all to the struggle against those Sunni opponents following the Deobandi tradition or those claiming to be Salafis that Shi'ite Muslims often collectively label as "Wahhabi," and whose known antipathy towards Shi'ite traditions puts them in the role of the main threatening other for Shi'ite activists. While the media dimensions of the public sphere are a domain of intense competition between different Islamic currents and piety movements in Mumbai, national regimes of governing religion and religious pluralism also profoundly influence how urban aspirations among Muslims in Mumbai articulate themselves in media practices.

In the neighborhood of Dongri in south-central Mumbai that is home to a large Shi'ite population, the staff of World Islamic Network (WIN), a Shi'ite media center,

⁹Jim Masselos (1982, 57) also interprets nineteenth-century sources on the dramatic dimensions of *majalis* among local Shi'ites in the following way: "It was as if Husain and his followers were dying then and there."

not only produce and distribute “small” audiovisual media, such as video CDs and MP3 disks,¹⁰ but also run a cable television channel with its own production studio and a website, and have recently even acquired a license for satellite broadcasting. WIN was founded in 1991 and is still directed by Imran Rasool, a graphic designer and entrepreneur who owns a factory for wooden gift articles and who, together with other Ithna Ashari Khoja associates, began distributing free Islamic books and organizing evening tutoring classes, gradually expanding into Islamic propagation through electronic media in the following years. Ever since its foundation, WIN has remained close to Shi‘ite institutions in Mumbai run by members of the Khoja Shia Ithna Ashari Jama‘at of the city (see also Mirza 2014). Its board of trustees consists entirely of Ithna Ashari Khoja professionals and businessmen, while one of the religious guides of the media center, Maulana Sayed Ahmedali Abedi, is the prayer leader at the Khoja Shia Ithna Ashari Masjid across the street from WIN, and also the head of the *hawza* (Shi‘ite seminary of higher learning for the training of *‘ulema*) in nearby Najafi House.

This building is also the headquarters of the Al-Iman Charitable Trust, an important foundation run by members of the Khoja Shia Ithna Ashari Jama‘at. Moreover, Maulana Sayed Ahmedali Abedi is also considered the Mumbai representative of Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf, Iraq, who as a *marja‘* commands the allegiance of by far the majority of Twelver Shi‘ite Muslims in India. The networks of *marja‘iyya* are of supreme importance for the running of WIN’s activities. WIN (as also the Al-Iman Charitable Trust) has obtained the formal permission (*ijaza*) from Ayatollah Sistani to collect *sahm-e imam* contributions on the latter’s behalf. *Sahm-e imam* is the 50 percent of *khums* that is intended for use by the respective *marja‘* followed, and thus is considered an obligatory financial responsibility for Shi‘ite Muslims who have the means to pay it.¹¹ (The other half of *khums* known as *sahm-e sadat* is intended for the maintenance of needy Ithna Ashari Shi‘ites who are *sayyid* (pl. *sadat*), that is who can claim to be descendants of the *ahl al-bayt*.) Twelver Shi‘ites who according to their financial position are obliged to pay *khums* have the possibility to give *sahm-e imam* directly to their preferred *marja‘*, to his legal representative, or to an organization such as WIN that has obtained the formal permission of the respective *marja‘* to collect this contribution on his behalf and use it for approved charitable and religious activities.

According to Imran Rasool, the transformations in the Shi‘ite world that came about with the Iranian revolution had a deep impact on Shi‘ite life in Mumbai, and also motivated him to found WIN. “I was inspired by the Iranian revolution, by what Imam Khomeini did. I felt we had to start something. We never talked to our Sunni brothers about Shiaism, we were backward in our *tabligh* and never reached out to others. Also I was encouraged by the arrival of Musavi, who started many new activities.” Mohammad

¹⁰Some of the MP3 disks produced: World Islamic Network (n.d.a, n.d.b, 2005). Devotional events and lectures also circulate transnationally on video CDs, MP3 disks, and also occasionally on DVDs published by WIN. For example, several of my interlocutors in Mumbai had viewed and listened to the WIN-produced video CD of *majalis* by Maulana Sadiq Hasan recorded in Sharjah in 2003 (World Islamic Network 2003) and the DVD of lectures by Maulana Sayed Ammar Naqshwani at Bradford University in 2008 (World Islamic Network 2008).

¹¹According to dominant Twelver Shi‘ite interpretation, *khums* (“fifth” in Arabic) amounts to an annual contribution of 20 percent of all realized net savings per year, such as cash savings, business profits, gifts, prizes, and the value of unused items acquired during the year.

al-Musavi, an Iraqi cleric and follower of Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei (1899–1992) of Najaf, the predecessor of Ayatollah Sistani, arrived in Mumbai shortly after the Iranian revolution in 1980 and stayed there until 1992. Especially Ithna Ashari Khojas often credit him with bringing about a Shi'ite religious revival in the city. He established the Al-Iman Charitable Trust in 1981 at the behest of Ayatollah Khoei, with whom he was associated, while funds for the building of its location, Najafi House, were also provided by Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani, a leading figure of the Iranian Shi'ite religious establishment residing in Qum. Although Mumbai Twelver Shi'ites disagree about Musavi's scholarly credentials, with Mumbai Twelver Shi'ites who are not of Khoja background sometimes voicing skepticism about them, it is clear that Musavi stood for the more activist interpretation of the Karbala paradigm associated with the Iranian revolution, advocating practical engagement to improve social and educational conditions among Shi'ites and a new emphasis on public religious mobilization. As one of my older Khoja interlocutors put it, "before the revolution, there was only commemoration of past events in *majalis*, now very often there are speeches on present-day issues and problems of society, and about the solutions to such problems with an eye on the events at Karbala." Although the authority of Ayatollah Sistani is clearly dominant in the work of WIN, the media network has also secured an *ijaza* to collect *sahm-e imam* on behalf of Ali Hosseini Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, for its activities. In the field of publishing WIN has cultivated links to Iran as well; there is a long-standing cooperation with Ansariyan Publishers in Qum, who publish Shi'ite religious tracts and literature in a range of languages, including English and Urdu. WIN is thus not only part of a transnational network of Shi'ite trusts, organizations, and educational institutions centered on Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf, but also integrated in other networks of *marja'uyya* and can thus draw on several transnational links of financial, logistical, and spiritual support in the world of Shi'ite Islam.

The media center's activities focus not just on the production and distribution of Shi'ite devotional content, but also on addressing a broader public in Mumbai and beyond with the intention to improve the image of Muslims, denying the frequently alleged link between Islam and terrorism and portraying Indian Muslims as good citizens. Rather than championing the cause of Indian Muslims by appealing to the principles of equal rights and treatment for all citizens regardless of their religious identities, the center's activists couch their appeals to a broader public in the language of religious morality. Borrowing the government- and NGO-associated format of an educational "awareness campaign" for religious mobilization, during the past nine years, World Islamic Network has launched a "Muharram Awareness Campaign" in the month of Muharram, the month of ritual mourning for pious Shi'ites remembering Hussain's martyrdom on the tenth of that month. According to Imran Rasool, this campaign aims to "present a better image of Islam, as it is associated with terrorism through the actions of a few Wahhabis" and is heavily influenced by his knowledge of marketing that plays such an important role in his life as an entrepreneur, while more generally constituting an important dimension of living in an urban environment saturated with advertising.

I was sitting in WIN's production studio with Rasool and a visiting *mawлана* from Uttar Pradesh while the preparations for a new episode for the question-and-answer television show *Hadees-e zindagi* were going on around us. The issue of intra-Muslim competition immediately came up when I asked him about the elaborate WIN website that I

had been unable to access the previous day. The director answered with a knowing smile: “It has been hacked from Riyadh.” Although I had no way of independently verifying this assertion, the alleged Saudi dimension of the problems with the website clarified who were considered opponents of WIN. He then went on, asking me: “You have done research on Shia and other Muslims in India, why do you think the Wahhabis are spreading, why are they successful?” He expressed his concerns about the representation of Shi’ite Islam before a diverse Muslim public in the following way: “We Shia have the best product, but the worst packaging. With the Wahhabi it is the other way around.” As he put it, the Shi’ites “are backward in their *tabligh*. My experience from advertising tells me that images are always most powerful.”

In Muharram 2010/2011, World Islamic Network placed an image of the golden minarets of Imam Hussain’s magnificent tomb in Karbala juxtaposed with the iconic Taj Mahal Hotel, the main target of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai on November 26, 2008, on its website, as well as on large street billboards, advertising panels on Brihan-mumbai Electric Supply and Transport Undertaking (BEST) public buses and local trains (see figures 1 and 2), and digital advertising banners in large cities across India. In not targeting predominantly Shi’ite or even Muslim localities, the campaign is clearly directed at a wider national audience. In between the images of the Taj Mahal Hotel and the golden minarets of Karbala, the colors of the Indian flag create a blur, providing the visual background for the statement, “The Grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) Imam Hussain (a.s.) sacrificed his life to unite all who oppose terrorism and injustice” (see figure 3). The image was also reproduced with the slogan in Hindi written in Devanagari script (see figure 4). Not just the choice of language, but the rather purist, Sanskritized register employed clearly indicates the addressing of a non-Muslim public. Casting Shi’ite Muslims as ideal representatives of a “Muslim



Figure 1. The Muharram Awareness Campaign banner in English on a city bus, Mumbai 2011 (World Islamic Network 2012).



Figure 2. The Muharram Awareness campaign banners in English and Hindi in a local train, Mumbai 2011 (World Islamic Network 2012).

community” and also aimed at non-Muslims, the campaign sends an annual ecumenical message portraying Shi‘ite Muslims as people whose moral values and leaders make them exemplary Indian citizens, committed to serving the nation, furthering communal harmony, and through the tragedy of Karbala representing the world’s original victims of terrorism. In opposing Shi‘ite Muslims to a terrorist other, the makers of the campaign not only sought to strengthen the nationalist credentials of Shi‘ite Muslims but also shifted their discourse towards speaking for a more universal humanity, in uniting “all” who reject terrorism, and in inhabiting a more generalized voice of its victims. Seen from this perspective, this strategy thus also counters contemporary globally operating terrorists’ appeals to “humanity” (see Devji 2009) on similar terrain.

Another variant for this intervention into Indian public discourse was the Muharram Awareness Campaign of 2007, which showcased admiring statements about Imam Hussain attributed to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. For example, a BEST bus advertising panel displayed an alleged quote of Gandhi: “If ever India desires to become a successful country it should follow the principles of Imam Hussain.” This reflects a widely held conviction among Indian Shi‘ites that Gandhi’s anti-colonial strategy of resistance was inspired by what Shi‘ites consider Imam Hussain’s pious struggle against the tyrant Yazid (Hyder 2006, 170). For example, some among them consider Gandhi’s first salt *satyagraha* to be indebted to Hussain’s example at Karbala. A young salesclerk formulated the link between Hussain’s striving and India in the following way:

Gandhiji followed Imam Hussain, and what he took from him was that the number of people you have with you does not matter if you are honest and on the right way. Ultimately you will prevail. Hussain had only a few followers, and the army of Yazid was large. Likewise, on his first salt march Gandhiji did

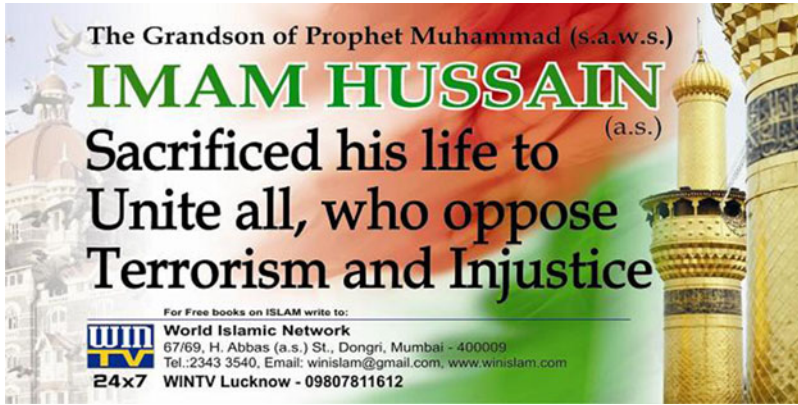


Figure 3. The Muharram Awareness Campaign banner in English (World Islamic Network 2012).

not have more than seventy-two followers, like Imam Hussain.¹² Gandhiji had a great vision, and had a lot of respect for the sacrifice of Imam Hussain. He could win India's freedom because he had the example of Imam Hussain when he was alone at first.

In my conversation with Shi'ite interlocutors in Mumbai, the alleged connection between Imam Hussain and India as the land of truth and spirituality was also a recurring theme. As for example a social worker maintained in a conversation with me, since India is the "land of truth and brotherhood," Hussain had intended to travel there. Street banners with reported sayings of Hussain and other members of the *ahl al-bayt* expressing admiration for India can be found during the month of Muharram and around the time of Hussain's *cehelom* (the ritual commemoration forty days after the death) in Mumbai and also in other large cities throughout India. For example, in 2009 banners in the vicinity of the Shi'ite Masjid-e Askari in Bangalore featured the colors of the Indian flag surrounded by images of the tombs of the Prophet Muhammad at Madina, his son-in-law Ali at Najaf, and his grandson Hussain at Karbala, and a map of India displayed the following saying attributed to Hussain while he was facing the enemy at Karbala: "O son of Sa'ad [the commander of the enemy army]. Do not shed my blood. Let me go to India, as the people of India are known for hospitality, nobility, non-violence, peace-loving [*sic*], and kindness." Above it, the Prophet's son-in-law and father of Hussain Ali is quoted: "The land where books were first written and from where wisdom first sprang is India" (see figure 5). Here, the public suggestion is that Shi'ite Muslims have a deep and intimate link with India for reasons that transcend a single religious tradition, since they stand for universal moral values for which India allegedly always has been a home.

The Muharram Awareness media campaign illustrates the versatility of what scholars of Shi'ism have called the "Karbala paradigm" (Aghaie 2004; Fischer 1980), a narrative of

¹²According to Shi'ite tradition, seventy-two of Imam Hussain's followers were martyred in the battle of Karbala.



Figure 4. The Muharram Awareness Campaign banner in Hindi (World Islamic Network 2012).

resistance and sacrifice in the face of oppression or other injustices against overwhelming odds. The narrative of Karbala has been mobilized in Indian nationalist struggles and reform politics (Hyder 2006); to repel a powerful invader through guerilla combat, such as more recently by Hezbollah in Lebanon; or to topple a powerful dictatorial government, as happened during the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and has more recently again been mobilized by supporters of the “green movement” in their protests against the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Fischer 2010). Especially the latter appeals to the story of Karbala exemplify the more revolutionary and activist shift the Karbala paradigm underwent before and after the Iranian revolution in some parts of the Muslim



Figure 5. Quotes on India from the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Ali, and Imam Hussain, Bangalore 2009. Photograph by the author.

world, while among Shi'ite Muslims in present-day Mumbai the memory of Hussain's martyrdom is turned into a call for national unity in the face of terrorist attacks and a claim for inclusion into the nation of those often suspected as being in association with the attackers.

RELIGIOUS MEDIA, INDIAN MUSLIMS, AND THE SECULAR

At the same time, the Muharram Awareness Campaign also raises more fundamental questions about the politics of secularism and religious diversity in India. The combination of religious mobilization and claims to citizenship in Mumbai as a global megacity evident in the campaign can only be understood if one also takes the regulation of religion and Indian politics of secularism into account. In indicating the status of Muslims as a marginalized minority in India who are constantly asked to affirm their loyalty to the nation, the Muharram Awareness Campaign points to a key dilemma in Indian secularism. Rajeev Bhargava (2007, 39–41) has called the guiding ideal of Indian secularism “principled distance,” which allows for context-sensitive support of and intervention in religious traditions. Such a politics of secularism also takes into account the community dimensions of religion, such as in the granting of collective rights and legal exceptions. Indian policies of secularism explicitly aim at supporting religious pluralism, and it is clear that they do not aim at a radical separation of state and religious institutions, and that a liberal privatization of the religious, problematic almost everywhere, would be illusory in India. Furthermore, there is also a strong Indian tradition of appealing to moral values supposedly shared across different traditions and ensuring peaceful and nonviolent coexistence of different religious communities, as evidenced by religiously inspired movements in the Indian past (Sen 1996). Here I address their contemporary mobilization in the context of multi-religious nation building that seeks to ensure peaceful coexistence by appealing to a presumed shared moral platform across religious divides.

But the Muharram Awareness Campaign also points to the fact that the ideals of equitable distance and support in Indian state doctrine are at a disjuncture with practice in which Muslims are treated with suspicion and are subject to special surveillance, and are expected to repeatedly perform signs of allegiance to the nation. From such a position, the campaign can thus also be regarded as the complying response to an interpellation or hailing (Althusser 1971, 171) of Muslims as a minority whose loyalty to the nation is always in question. The campaign as a dutiful response to such an interpellation thus reconstitutes the subject positions of Indian Muslims as questionable and marginal citizens, despite the fact that the makers of the campaign actually aim at demonstrating their full and exemplary citizenship.

The secular dimensions of the Indian state base their legitimacy not on a putative separation of state from the sphere of the religious, but on an ideal of even-handedness towards different religious communities. The ideal of even-handedness is also an inheritance from the colonial state, as well as its tendency to also periodically intervene in the affairs of religious communities to ban or reform practices deemed as “backward.” As Partha Chatterjee (2006) has recently pointed out, this policy has had very different results and political repercussions when directed at minorities. Such interventions often aim at controlling allegedly subversive tendencies among Indian Muslims, and

have often generated mistrust and resistance. In fact, from the perspective of many Indian Muslims, secularism means the absence of religious discrimination and protection of religious minorities (compare Mahajan 2003): “For them [Indian Muslims], the opposite of secularism is not religion but communalism and majoritarianism” (Anwar Alam 2012, 171; see also Irfan Ahmad 2009, 17), while, increasingly, for Indian Muslims, secularism has taken the meaning of a minority rights discourse (Anwar Alam 2012, 170). Thus, when Muslims demand the state to be secular, they demand protection and recognition of their religious identity and practices: “Most Indian Muslims viewed it as a political arrangement guaranteeing them the right to be equal citizens and lead their lives—collectively, not just individually, and publically, not just privately—in accordance with their own religious tradition” (Irfan Ahmad 2009, 14). At the same time, secularism understood in such a sense became not only a Muslim demand, because of its role in their protection as a minority, but also central to Muslim politics in postcolonial India (Irfan Ahmad 2009).

Nehruvian suspicions about the supposedly unenlightened religious passions of the Indian masses have made postcolonial Indian elites perceive the need for a secular state to contain such dangerous religiosity among Indian citizens (see Chatterjee 1995), while Nehru himself saw secularism as a means to curb religious majoritarian chauvinism in particular and to include Muslims and other minorities in democratic processes (Irfan Ahmad 2009, 18). The Muharram Awareness Campaign, however, partakes in an alternative strain of Indian secularism. Here, a Gandhian view of citizenship as morally grounded in religious tradition is very much in evidence, along with the sense that such moral values can transcend religious boundaries. This is remarkable in light of the longstanding discourse of “Hindu tolerance” based on a hierarchical opposition between inclusivist Gandhian forms of religiosity that are portrayed as essentially Indian and religions negatively branded as “proselytizing,” such as Christianity and Islam (Adcock 2014, 5–10). The theme of Hindu tolerance emerged in the nineteenth century as an instance of “cultural collusion” with an Orientalist genealogy (Burghart 1996, 278–99). Hindu nationalists have in turn drawn on this discourse to exclude Muslims from the nation. However, the Shi’ite makers of the Muharram Awareness Campaign have appropriated the theme of Gandhian religiosity for their own ends, precisely to justify their Indianness. The drawing of a contrast between supposedly true, benign religiosity ensuring tolerance and coexistence under conditions of religious pluralism and the destructive political instrumentalization of religion often referred to as communalism is essential to this approach, despite the fact that there is little evidence for the existence of such an unsullied and ideal kind of religiosity in India (Hansen 2000). It appeals to an idealized vision of pure and pluralistic folk religiosity deeply connected to an Indian historical heritage of inclusive and “ecumenical” religious practices, which in the view of intellectuals such as Ashis Nandy (1990, 1998) have grievously suffered from contamination through essentially alien and anti-religious forms of secularism in postcolonial India.

In positioning Indian Shi’ite Muslims as sharing such moral values that make them fit to be good Indian citizens and abhor religiously motivated violence, the Muharram Awareness Campaign appeals to this particular vision of pluralism in which the religiosity of Shi’ite Muslims and a mobilization of religious values to regulate coexistence and citizenship are in consonance. In staging their claims to citizenship, the makers of the campaign not only mobilize religious images, they also give very specific religious reasons to

support their claim. Accordingly, as inheritors of the tragedy of Karbala, and by regularly practicing its commemoration, Indian Shi'ite Muslims deeply abhor terrorism and other forms of violent injustice. In this way, the campaign combines displays of piety, religious mobilization in public, and claims for inclusion and citizenship through media practices that are concentrated in the global city.

CONCLUSION

The Muharram Awareness campaign demonstrates how religious mobilizations that are at least in part driven by the dynamics of globalization, such as the availability of digital audiovisual technologies, the spread of major standardized religions, and the phenomenological resonance between certain religious ontologies and the center-periphery structures of the globalized world, are also crucially shaped by national regimes of regulating religious diversity. Intra-Muslim religious diversity and competition as well as Indian policies and practices of religious pluralism and secularism provide a framework for articulating the religious aspirations of Shi'ite Muslims in Mumbai, regardless of the fact that those same aspirations also owe much of their force to global processes. At the same time, my discussion also points to the internal diversity of discourses and policies of secularism in India. In favoring and appropriating a particular Gandhian vision of secularism over others, and by giving religious reasons for their inclusion in the nation, Shi'ite Muslims voice their claim to be full Indian citizens in a way that also highlights and promotes their particular religious aspirations in a very visible manner. As much as recent scholarship has emphasized the global dimensions of media-driven religious activism, the specific shape of public piety and advertising found in the Muharram Awareness Campaign responds to and simultaneously reinscribes national modes of regulating religious diversity in India and points to the precarious position Indian Muslims inhabit in the nation.

By giving specific religious reasons for their inclusion into the nation, Shi'ite activists raise the question of whether such reasons can be acceptable for those partaking in other religious traditions, as suggested by Charles Taylor, or are subject to a principle of broader translatability that implies a relativizing attitude to the religious tradition in question, as argued by Habermas (Habermas and Taylor 2011). Certainly in the scenario I analyze here, the connection between the ability to sound coherent to others in a public sphere and a relativizing stance to religious tradition appears not only irrelevant, but is actually inverted, since the display of Shi'ite piety is supposed to support the claim for inclusion in the overwhelmingly non-Muslim nation. The confidence of the campaigners in the recognizability of the narrative of Karbala across religious boundaries in a broader Indian public is striking, and given the history of the Karbala paradigm in Indian politics and the broad patterns of ritual participation in the past, not unwarranted.

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