

Muslim Devotional Art in India

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Fig. i. *Quran Sharif*, a devotional poster depicting the Qur'ān and the shrines at Mecca and Medina. Published by Brijbasi, New Delhi, ca. 1960. From the author's collection.

INTRODUCTION

The Duller the Better

AS a child I believed that Muslims were of two kinds — those who prepared *halwa* (fudge) on the occasion of Shab-e Barāt¹ and those who didn't. Ours was a family that didn't, much to the disappointment of my cousins and I, who satiated our cravings somehow with the platefuls of halwa sent by our neighbours. They used to make, and still do, so many varieties of them on *Shab-e Barāt* — the dried hard cakes of *suji ka halwa* (fudge made of flour) or the soft *chane ki dāl ka halwa* (fudge made of gram pulse, oil and sugar) — both extremely irresistible, especially since they were not being cooked in our house that day. Our elders would provide solace in the declaration that by not preparing the *halwa* we were being better and purer Muslims compared to those who did. And since by doing that we had a surer chance of going to paradise, we would get even more delicious varieties of halwa there.

This used to be somewhat puzzling to me: Why should someone be declared a flawed Muslim for preparing a sweet delicacy and distributing it around? And what really is this difference that made *us* better? I started noticing other dividing lines too: our neighbours used to observe customs such as Muharram or Eid-e Milād un-Nabi (the Prophet's birthday) with much fervour and élan, while we sat at home, simply watching from our terrace the noisy and colourful processions pass by the street below. They made some grand *ta'zias* (replicas of the martyrs' tombs) and

'alams (flags) on the occasion of Muharram in the densely populated town of Moradabad in north India, where I spent a part of my childhood in the 1970s. For hours I would watch the boys cut green paper frills and screens and paste them around long bamboo skeletons, giving them the shape of beautiful towers that would be carried in the processions, accompanied by the loud drumming of brass cymbals and kettledrums playing a marching beat that still echoes in my ears (Fig. 1). Often the processions carried large paintings of revered Islamic icons such as Burrāq or Zuljinah, or even a model of Medina's green-domed mosque. On the Prophet's birthday, candles were lit on the façades of our neighbours' houses and a *neyāz* (blessing/prayer) was offered on sweetmeats before distributing them. Women and grown-up girls would gather at homes to sing *milāds* and *nā'ts* (songs in praise of the Prophet).



Fig. 1. Shi'a and Sunni Muslim men and women venerating 'alams during Muharram 'ashura in a village in Uttar Pradesh, India. Photograph by the author, 2009.

Members of our family, however, kept themselves aloof from all this. If my cousins and I were ever found standing on the road, watching the boys prepare the *ta'zias*, we were quickly dragged inside and scolded by an uncle, as if in so doing we might have picked an infectious disease from the street urchins. Sometimes even the boys indulging in these activities were harshly scolded or asked to take their paraphernalia someplace else. I noticed our elders using words like *bid'ati* or *Barelvi* to deplore our neighbours and their activities, while the terms *Deobandi* or *Wahhābi* were used to refer to our family's religious affiliation.