Three Shi‘a Poets
Sect-Related Themes in Pre-Modern Urdu Poetry

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which sectarian differences were approached by three major Urdu poets: Sauda, Mir and Ghalib. These poets evoked, acknowledged, played upon, and even enjoyed Sunni-Shi’a differences without the situation always reaching some kind of instantaneous flashpoint of sectarian “tension”. Contrary to recent arguments that sectarian affiliation can be discerned through evidence of ritual practice of pilgrimage and paying respect to the shrines of certain historical personages of spiritual importance, in the Indian environment, as no doubt elsewhere also, it appears difficult to pin down sectarian affiliation from rituals and expressions of respect and devotion to the Prophet’s household.

Keywords

India, Mughal era, Islam, Shi’ism, poetry
Introduction
Three of the most prominent pre-modern, and perhaps the three greatest, poets of the Urdu language – Saudā, Mīr, and Ghālib¹ – appear to have deep associations with the Shi'i sect of Islam. This fact does not attract attention in general. Indeed, it may be argued that the typical reader would not be aware of these particular eighteenth and nineteenth-century poets’ sectarian identities, despite their great fame and popularity. One reason for this, it may also be argued, is that sectarian affiliation hardly figured prominently in the poetry of these poets. While this might be true for the major part of their verse, a survey of the kullīyāt (complete works) of Saudā, Mīr, and Ghālib, yields a number of interesting poems where sectarian themes appear to be directly evoked or addressed, either through laying out a claim for one’s own self, or by refuting the claim of another.

While in no instance can engagement with sectarian themes in these poets’ published verse be said to venture into the territory of tabarrā (ritual cursing of one’s enemies), some of the writing may be seen to be reflective of the practice of barā’at (expressing dissociation from one’s enemies).² What’s more, one of the most intriguing aspects of these writings, given historical and persisting ideas of sectarian “tensions” in diverse and multi-sect Muslim settings, is that the poets sometimes introduce potentially controversial sectarian references in an almost humorous, light-hearted vein.

This paper explores instances in the poetry of Saudā, Mīr, and Ghālib conveying specifically sectarian connotations, and attempts to analyse the implications of such verses in the social and literary milieu in which the three poets were writing. What, for example, did it mean to highlight one’s own or some contemporary’s sectarian affiliation in the context of a poem? What, if any, were the social implications for the literary evocation of sectarian themes that might be considered ‘sensitive’ in many modern contexts? And finally, can such poetry and contextual material from the lives of these poets tell us anything about the way in which sectarian relations played out between Sunnis and Shi’as at particular pre-modern moments in the Hindustani³ context?

¹ I have followed a scheme of transliteration largely based on John T. Platts, A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English (London: Low, Marston, 1895), http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/platts/
³ i.e. North Indian
A note on Shiʿism in the Indian environment

With the coming of colonial modernity, India for the first time went through the experience of a census wherein British administrators attempted to classify the population into distinct and internally homogenous religious categories, with some groups and subgroups emerging as ‘minorities’ and others as ‘majorities’. This politics of enumeration ultimately played an important role in India’s political destiny (and continues to exercise considerable influence on present-day politics in the modern Indian nation-state), since the world’s largest population of Muslims now came to constitute a minority in a colonial state where the diverse religious customs of the majority of the population were classified as Hindu. What it also meant was that a vast Shiʿi population, comparable in number only to Qājār Iran, was now perceived as forming a minority subgroup within the minority Muslim population of British India. The upsurge of violence against Pakistani Shiʿa in recent years and consequent local and international activism calling for the protection of a vulnerable “minority community” has done much to solidify this perceptual minoritisation of the Shiʿa in a (seemingly paradoxical) context where the movement to found a separate state for all the Muslims of British India was led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, an individual who clearly belonged to a Shiʿi family.

From a historical perspective, however, it would perhaps be a mistake to view the Shiʿa as a minority community in India, firstly since the concept of minoritisation does not apply in the proper sense in a pre-nineteenth century context where a formal census had not yet taken place, and secondly because of the influential and powerful position of Shiʿi individuals and families not only as members of the Mughal court, but also as ruling dynasties in their own right – such as the Bahmanīs (1347-1527), and the Nawwābs of Awadh (1724-1856) – in different regions of India in various time periods since the advent of Muslim-ruled kingdoms in India. Although the Mughals, the major ruling dynasty of India (1526-1857), are known as a Sunni dynasty, studies of South Asian Islam have often seen the preponderantly high representation of Shiʿa among the Muslim elite, and their historic associations with ruling dynasties as being instrumental in Shiʿism’s great “influence” over Indian Muslim culture in general. All this serves to limit the relevance of colonial statistics such as those determining the Shiʿa as forming about three per cent of the Muslim population in most districts in British India.4

While Shiʿism in South Asia certainly enjoyed a visibility and prominence above and beyond statistical calculations of its actual formal adherents, the question of “influence” is much harder to address. Understandings of potential influence seem largely to be based on the prevalence of ʿazādārī rites among not just Shiʿa but also Sunnis in the month of Muḥarram. When scholars attribute the participation of Hindu groups in

Muḥarram celebrations to a hegemonic Muslim presence in India, the logic is perfectly clear. However, in the predominant attribution of South Asian Sunnis’ historically popular participation in Muḥarram rituals to Shi’ism’s considerable political and cultural power in India’s specific environment, scholars might be operating under the mistaken assumption that with respect to shared Shi’i-Sunni participation in Muḥarram rites, the case of South Asia is a unique example of inter-sect harmony and cooperation, and that Sunnis elsewhere in the world do not perform (or have historically not performed) mourning rituals of various kinds during the month of Muḥarram. A second assumption is that Muḥarram celebrations basically were and are initiated and organised by Shi’is, and that Sunnis (like the Hindus) merely joined in. If this were taken to be true, how then would we account for the fact that the biggest ta’ziyahs in South Asia were historically almost all built by Sunnis, and till this day largely continue to be so?

One theory that is commonly proposed for this perceived convergence in Shi’i and Sunni Muḥarram observances is the influence of Sufi orders and their traditional devotion to the Prophet’s household in creating “certain synergies” between normative Sunni practice and Shi’ism. The argument is also made that there was less strife between Shi’a and Sunnis prior to the modern period because a majority of Sunnis were apparently under the influence of Sufis who were “not averse to the observance of certain Shi’a practices”. Interestingly, the point about Sufi orders as serving to influence Sunnis to show devotion to the Prophet’s family members is made in a way that seems to assume, firstly, that there is some clear and discernible separation between Sufism and Sunnism, and, secondly, that devotion to the Prophet’s household could not originate from within the tenets of any Sunni

5 Karrar Ḥusain notes that “unlike other centres in the Muslim world, Muharram celebrations in South Asia are not exclusively the concern of the Shi’a. The initiative did come from the Shi’a, but the Sunni and even the Hindus take part in the Muharram celebrations. The ta’ziyahs are almost all built by the Sunni, and the marthīya majlis is not only attended by many Sunni and Hindus, but many Sunni and non-Muslim poets have cultivated this form with high artistic skill and deep devotion.” See Karrar Husain, “The Significance of the Urdu Marthīya,” in Papers from the Imam Husayn Conference, London, July 1984 (London: Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1986).

6 “The Iranian form of the ta’ziya, as a kind of drama or Passion Play, did not become popular as a practice in South Asia. The graphical representation of the Ahl-i Bait also did not find currency. Here the ta’ziyah developed a form that quite different from that in Iran. See Ḥusain, “The Significance,” 265.

7 For the famous Urdu poet Jaun Elia’s (1931-2002) humorous take on the shaping of Muḥarram rituals in South Asia, see http://www.kidvai.com/windmills/Media/JoT.mp3

8 Jones, Shi’i Islam, 5.

9 Madhu Trivedi, The Making of the Awadh Culture (Delhi: Primus, 2010), 16-18.

10 Historian Azfar Moin also cautions against the tendency to attribute any element of commonality between Shi’a and Sunnis, or between the Safavid and Mughal dynasties, to the “mystical” practices of Sufism. See Azfar A. Moin. The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 7.
school or be native to it. It is difficult to understand what could be behind such an assumption unless one sees it as a result of an unconscious privileging of the viewpoints of certain modern and early modern “reformist” scholars who emerged from within Sunni communities and described many Muḥarram-associated rituals as being alien to the spirit of “Islam”. What is more, the privileging of the historical role of mystical or “Sufi” practice in promoting more peaceable relations between the Shi‘i and Sunni sects through emphasising devotion to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the Prophet’s family also ignores the fact that in the modern era, those Sunni groups who are the most ardent supporters of mystical practices and Muḥarram celebrations have often shown themselves to be at the forefront of anti-Shi’a polemic.\(^\text{11}\)

Hence, while recognising that many aspects of Shi‘i and Sunni practice shared great similarity in the pre-modern era (as well as today) in South Asia as well as other parts of the world, it is also important to recognise that this does not mean that Shi‘i-Sunni interactions in South Asia were entirely free of conflict before the dawn of the modern era, an era which has seen several civil disturbances of a sectarian nature and unprecedented scale in both pre- and post-Partition India,\(^\text{12}\) as well as recurrent and brutal incidents of targeted sectarian violence by militant groups in Pakistan.\(^\text{13}\) The sharpening of sectarian divisions in the modern period have often led commentators to depict the pre-modern past as a halcyon period of Sunni-Shi‘a relations. The essayist and historian of Lucknow, ‘Abd ul-Ḥalīm Sharar, writes about Awadh’s Nawwābī period\(^\text{14}\) as one in which no one “knew” who was a Muslim and who was not.\(^\text{15}\) While this is quite unlikely to be literally true as we shall soon see in the case of Ghālib, what Sharar probably means to imply is that sectarian affiliation did not matter at all in day-to-day interactions. This retrospective description of Sharar’s was penned in the early twentieth century while comparing his present to the situation before the middle of the nineteenth century, before a full and formal colonial takeover had taken places in India. However, interestingly enough, the very same words as Sharar’s are today

\(^{11}\) Jones, Shi‘a Islam, 57.

\(^{12}\) There were a number of civil agitations relating to the public recitation of \textit{tabarrā} in the early twentieth century.

\(^{13}\) See Justin Jones for a study of the sharpening sectarian lines between Shi‘a and Sunnis in colonial India. Jones privileges the colonial period for the growth of ideas of religious community quite new to Shi‘ism in India. He credits the formalisation of a systematic Shī‘a religion to wider engagement with “local, regional and transnational religious publics” as a result of “new technologies of travel, communication and public organization”, Orientalist influence in implanting a new sense of internal homogeneity within religious communities and “expansion of religious knowledge and doctrinal systematization of religious difference”. His theory is that “it was in the language of \textit{qaum}, generated by the communications of the modern public sphere, that this separateness was mostly manufactured.” See Jones, Shi‘a Islam, 18-19, 143-144.

\(^{14}\) The situation of Mughal Delhi is unlikely to have been very different from Awadh despite the fact that Nawwabs of Awadhs were Shi‘a unlike the Mughals.

\(^{15}\) Jones, Shi‘a Islam, 14.
used by South Asians to describe the situation prior to the 1970s and ’80s. It is thus clearly a romanticised view of sectarian relations.

Evidence shows that in the latter half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century – the period when our three poets were living and writing in North Indian cities like Agra, Delhi, Lucknow, and Rampur – a great quantity of polemical treatises were written in India both in Arabic and Persian as a result of Sunni-Shi‘i ideological confrontations, perhaps the most famous of these treatises being Shah ‘Abdul Aziz’s *Tuḥfah-i ʿIṣnāb ‘Asharīyyah*. In 1758-9, a Sunni ‘ālim, Maulāna ‘Abdul Aziz Bahr ul-ʿulūm, was forced to move away from Lucknow following an incident of violence during a Muḥarram procession when he was perceived to show disrespect to a *taʿziyah*. Some years later, there was an incident of bloody rioting between the Sunni Rohillāhs of Najīb ud-Daulah and the Shi‘a soldiers of Shujā‘ ud-Daulah’s army during a campaign of the Mughal emperor Shāh ‘Ālam. During the reign of Ghāzīuddīn Ḥaidar in Awadh (1814-19), an incident of rioting was averted when the Shi‘a of Nasirābād decided to recite *tabarrā* publicly in Muḥarram, causing the Shi‘a king to forbid this practice in response to the complaints of Sunni subjects. During this general period, campaigns to ban *taʿziyah* processions were also led by groups that scholars today characterise as ‘revivalist’, although they do not appear to have enjoyed wide success.

Hence, we can see that Saudā, Mir, and Ghālib’s Hindustan was by no means devoid of sectarian “tensions”. While recognising this fact, we should also note that there appears to be a significant practice of inter-sect Shi‘a-Sunni marriage during this period (resulting in a situation where members of the same household were often affiliated to different sects), Sunni jurists continued to be employed by the Awadh Nawwābs, Sunnis and Shi‘as studied together at the theological seminary of Farangī Maḥal, and it was also not a rare thing to see Sunnis serving as guardians of Shi‘a *waqfs* and *imambārās*. It was not till much later that a separate theological seminary was established for Shi‘a *ʿulamā*, and appeals were made to remove Shi‘i *waqfs* from Sunni guardianship, and not until 1871 that separate Shi‘i and Sunni graveyards were established in a city like Lucknow.

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16 Trivedi, *The Making of the Awadh Culture*, 93-95. Jones appears to credit the development of a “culture of debate and antagonism between various Muslim schools” as one of the major transformative effects of modernity. See Jones, *Shi‘a Islam*, 52. However, while the intensity might have been different, pre-modern India was by no means unaquainted with such a culture.


19 Ibid.


One thing that emerges clearly from this complex mix of trends and events is that although it should not be discounted that some Shi'a in certain social contexts and locations in a region as large and diverse as North India might have felt tempted to or obliged to practice taqiyyah, it does appear that numerous individuals and groups were prominently and openly known to belong to the Shi'i persuasion despite living in the mainstream of what remained predominantly Sunni urban and rural settings. This open recognition of sectarian difference in everyday contexts makes it especially interesting to explore the meaning behind poetic acts highlighting this difference and the way these poetic acts were received at the social and political level.

Perhaps the challenge of probing sectarian relations in Mughal India’s cosmopolitan context is best captured in Juan Cole’s expression of bafflement at finding education in eighteenth-century Awadh remaining “strangely” ecumenical despite powerful forces of communal strife and separation. It appears that the seemingly contradictory trends of ideological antagonism, and extensive and largely seamless everyday dealings is the characteristic feature of Shi’a-Sunni relations in Mughal India, as will be borne out in the analysis of sectarian themes emerging in poetry in this paper.

**Saudā, the merciless lampooner**

Although the poetry of Mirzā Muḥammad Rafī ‘Saudā’ (1713-81) comprises very fine verse in a wide variety of classical forms, in the world of Urdu literature his name has most famously come to be associated with his hajws and qaṣīdahs at which he is really said to have excelled. Saudā’s ancestors are

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22 This ability of Mughal India to successfully “assimilate” and “accommodate” peoples of openly diverse sectarian and religious persuasions and largely maintain the peace between them has often been celebrated by modern scholars. Although one must beware of modern nationalist tendencies in what is often a self-congratulatory analysis, there does appear to be some difference in the way that Shi’a-Sunni relations appeared to operate in India on the one hand and in the Safavid Empire or the Ottoman Empire on the other, where there appears to have been greater need to hide, or at least be much more discreet about, a “minority” sectarian affiliation. See Rosemary Stanfield-Johnson, "The Tabarra'iyan and the Early Safavids." *Iranian Studies* 37.1 (2004): 47-71; and Rula J. Abisaab, "The Shi’ite ‘ulama’, the Madrasas, and Educational Reform in the Late Ottoman Period." *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 36 (2010): 155-8.


24 "...a hajv is a poem ridiculing someone or something. A hajv is a poem with a specific target, its purpose is to ridicule the target, never mind what you say about the target is based on facts or not. The more scurrilous the terms of ridicule, the better the hajv. True, very often the hajv makes the reader laugh. But this is because human beings always tend to laugh at another’s discomfort." Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, "The Satires of Sauda (1706-1781)." Sept. 2010, 7.

thought to be *mirzās* of Mughal descent.\(^{25}\) He spent the earlier part of his career at the Delhi court of the Mughals, while later years were spent at the Awadh court. There appears to be no dispute about his affiliation to the Shi‘a sect of Islam. According to one account, both the maternal and paternal sides of his family belonged to the *imāmiyah* sect (or school, depending on how it is looked at), and while his maternal grandfather Ně‘mat Kháň ‘Alī was a laid-back, jocular sort of person, he was fervent to the extreme on sectarian points. Because of his ancestry, Saudā is generally accepted to be a Shi‘i.\(^{26}\)

Saudā has a whole separate *dīwān* of *marṣīyahs*, so many did he say.\(^{27}\) He has also expressed his devotion to the Prophet’s household in other genres beside the traditional *marṣīyah* and *qaṣīdah*.

He also wrote verses in praise of ‘Alī’s āstānah (threshold of tomb) and the *mazārs* (graves) of other spiritual personages, such as Ḥusain ibn ‘Alī and Mūsā Raţā.\(^{28}\) There are twelve *salāms* in his collected works.\(^{29}\) He has also written a *masnawi* critiquing the art of *marṣīyah* and *salām* styles of a writer named Taqī and implied that poets of mediocre calibre win easy praise by composing *marāṣī* which, however low their quality, will be lauded by the common herd because of their religious nature.\(^{30}\)

As far as his many *hajws* are concerned, only three are said to relate directly to religious or sectarian matters. Two are directed at a certain hapless Sunni, Maulawī Sājid, who appears to have earned Saudā’s ire by declaring that the crow is *ḥalāl* to eat. Initially, Saudā composed a poem lampooning him for being a buffoon and a clown for going against all the books of *fiqh* to issue such a ridiculous pronouncement (*ik maskhrāh yih kahta hai kawwā ḥalāl hai*), for then the next step would be an eagle being *ḥalāl*, and then why should the owl be excluded? Sājid’s *fatwā* invites on him the wrath and ridicule of the whole world, and even his own servant refuses to sample the crow he has cooked for him claiming it to be unlawful fare (*kis mujtahid ke fatwe par oska chakhoon main kẖūn?*).

Modern discussion of Saudā continues to be characterised by anxiety about his civility or lack thereof, and his sectarian “narrow-mindedness”. The last seems largely to be on account of another religious *hajw* of Saudā’s. In the

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\(^{25}\) There appears to be some dispute about where exactly they hailed from. S. R. Faruqi thinks that they were probably from Kashmir. See Faruqi, *The Satires*, 9-11. Shaikh Chand says that they were soldiers from Kabul. See Shaikh Chând, *Saudā Mirzā Muḥammad Raft* (Aurangabād: Anjuman-i taraqqī-yi urdū, 1930), 35. Anjum disputes this, and quotes Naqş ‘Alī, who knew Saudā personally, stating that Saudā’s ancestors had come from Buḵhārā. He claims that there is also evidence in Saudā’s *kalām* of his Buḵhārā ancestry and that he looked down on the *mirzās* of Kābul. See Khaliq Anjum, *Mirzā Muḥammad Raft* (ʻAlīgarh: Anjuman-i-taraqqī-yi urdū (Hind), 1966), 55-56.

\(^{26}\) Ḥusain Qulī Kháň ʻAshiqī and ʻAlī Luţı write that Saudā was buried in Imām Bārā Bāqīr. See Anjum, *Mirzā Muḥammad Raft* 132.

\(^{27}\) Chând, *Saudā*, 282.


\(^{29}\) Chând, *Saudā*, 311.

\(^{30}\) Chând, *Saudā*, 287.
published *kulliyāt* of Saudā, it has been printed under the title “*Qaṣīdah dar hajw-i shakhsa kih muta’ašib būd*”, that is, “An Ode Lampooning a Fellow Who Was a Bigot”. However, in many manuscripts, the subject of the poem is identified by name as the famous Naqshbandī mystic and scholar Shāh Waliullah (d. 1762).

This *hajw* of Shāh Waliullah has certainly caused a negative impression of Saudā in certain minds as a ‘narrow-minded’, intolerant individual who goes off on a foul-mouthed, abusive tirade over the most minor of sectarian differences, therefore being worse than the most bigoted of petty preachers [*khuṅuk-dil wā’īz aur mażhab parast maulawi*] who can’t live with an opinion opposed to his own. However, there is other evidence from Saudā’s verse 31 and life showing that categorisations like liberal-minded [*wasi‘ mashrab*] or narrow-minded [*tang nażar*] would reflect rather too neat an approach in dealing with a poet like Saudā. Notwithstanding his criticism of Shāh Waliullah in this poem, Saudā appears to have been on very good terms with two other individuals who were Sunni and Naqshbandī like Shāh Waliullah – the poets Mīr Dard (d. 1785) and Mirzā Mażhar Jān-i Jānān32 (d. 1781).

Yet it is important to point out that the greatest victim of Saudā’s *hajw-goyī* was Mir Ghulām Ḥusain Zāhik (d. 1782), a poet of Shi’a Sayyid lineage (that is, from the Prophet’s line), who apparently loved to write *hajws* of

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31 Čănd, *Saudā*, 85-87. Faruqi is surprised to find Saudā writing a *hajw* of Shāh Waliullah at all: "The third *hajw* is, most unexpectedly, against the great sufi and scholar Shāh Waliullah who is universally respected as perhaps the greatest Muslim reformer, religious leader and intellectual sufi of the eighteenth century. Shāh Waliullah is reported to have viewed with some favour the shi’a practice of honouring and weeping for Imam Ḥusain’s martyrdom at Karbala. Yet he also held that the Caliphate of Ali (the first and greatest shi’ī Imam and the Prophet’s son in law) wasn’t really established technically because a section of Muslims didn’t swear the oath of allegiance to him. This seems to have caused Saudā’s outburst against Shāh Waliullah." See Faruqi, "The Satires," 10. However, in much modern scholarly and polemical discussion, Shāh Waliullah is held to have fanned criticism of practices associated with the Shi’a sect, and his son, the author of the polemical treatise *Tuḥfah-i Ḣusnā ‘Ashārīyyah*, is said to have discouraged Sunnis from associating with Shi’as, "whether through marriage or by eating animals slaughtered by them". See Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 84.

32 This friendship is especially interesting in the light of Schimmel’s claim that Mażhar even composed a defense of Mu’āwiyah, desiring that this “just and successful” ruler should be treated like any companion of the Prophet. See Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-century Muslim India* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), 18.
others. Žāhik is in some places mocked from being a shameless glutton, and in other places being an insult to the name of his holy progenitors, since writing such foul-mouthed hajws of other people was hardly the mark of a Sayyid.

In analyzing Saudā’s hajws, perhaps we should keep in mind that he would marshal whatever real or false information he could against his subject in order to ridicule them. Perhaps, despite Saudā’s biographers’ shame and horror at some of what he had written, it is precisely because of a larger part of his words were widely understood during his time to be completely without weight that we seldom hear about his subjects confronting him for casting aspersions on the honour of their household, especially their women. His hajws of Mir Žāhik do not seem to have prevented the latter’s son, the renowned poet Mir Ḥasan, from becoming Saudā’s student. Saudā ridiculed Mir Taqi Mir for being a fake Sayyid as well as for presuming to make corrections in other people’s poetry, but Mir praised Saudā highly in his tagkiraḥ of Urdu poets, Nikāt ush-Shu’arā.

We thus find interesting examples of several kinds of religious themes in Saudā’s poetry: laudatory verse for sacred figures, mockery of doctrinal interpretations he disagrees with, scorn towards non-Shi’i versions of Islamic political history, and ridiculing the lineage or character of fellow Shi’a figures. Despite achieving tremendous fame as a poet during his lifetime, there does not appear to be evidence of any significant reaction at the social level during his day to the verses that so many editors find so contentious and prefer to omit from published editions of his work in today’s modern era where expanded networks of communication also bring the potential of amplifying controversy through the mass media. These points can be illustrated with a famous anecdote from Saudā life.

Saudā’s patron Āṣaf ud-Daulah had gone hunting one day, and when the news of his successfully killing a lion reached Saudā, he promptly composed the verse:

33 Let there be anywhere even a whiff of something eatable, he'll concentrate all his senses there,
And like a fly, he'll pound his head with both hands.
If someone's house is on fire, and there's just a trace of smoke,
While people go rushing to put out the fire,
He dashes forth, plate in hand
Hoping for food.

35 Anjum thinks Saudā just wrote his hajw just to punish Žāhik a little for writing hajws of many people he knew. See Anjum, Mirzā Muḥammad Ra’ī Saudā, 313-316.
36 Ibid., 293.
Friends, this Ibn-i Muljam\(^{37}\) has been born again
Who has killed the lion of God\(^{38}\) in the forest of the Bhīls\(^{39}\)

Upon hearing it, the Nawwāb, a fellow Shi‘i, laughingly remonstrated with Saudā about turning him into the murderer of the Lion of God, that is ‘Alī. Saudā’s reply was that the lion he had killed was surely God’s alone, and belonged neither to the Nawwāb nor to Saudā.\(^{40}\) This eighteenth-century incident became a humorous anecdote. In modern times, the employment of the same phrase, ‘sher-i khudā’, in a children’s poem by prominent Pakistani social worker Akhtar Hameed Kahn, was used to file a court case against him in the early 1990s for insulting the fourth Caliph of Islam under his country’s colonial-era blasphemy law which makes it a crime to defile the religious sentiments of any community.\(^{41}\)

**Mir, the Sayyid**
Mir Taqī “Mir” (d. 1810), although most famous for the sublime mastery he displayed in the art of ghazal-goyi, also wrote many beautiful elegies for members of the Prophet’s household. There appears to be little doubt about his affiliation to the Shi‘i sect,\(^{42}\) which is considered to be hereditary. Although there appears to be evidence that his father’s line may not have been Shi‘a, his mother is thought to be from a family of Shi‘a Sayyids.\(^{43}\)

Mir’s elegies are extremely solemn, and can perhaps be said to surpass even Mir Anīs’ magnificent, pathos-filled eloquence in the sheer anguish they tend to produce without allowing catharsis of any kind. His poetic references to the Karbala event and the politics of succession to the Caliphate generally do not show signs of the kind of satirical elements that can be discerned in Saudā or Ghālib’s writings. However, his prose work Zikr-i Mīr, in which he

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\(^{37}\) The Kharijite who killed ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib

\(^{38}\) Sher-i khudā or Aṣadullah is a popular epithet for ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.

\(^{39}\) The Bhīls are a race of people who live in a number of mountainous and forested regions of India.


\(^{42}\) The scholar CM Naim also reads the fact that Mir, in the introduction to one of his prose works, praises the Prophet’s descendants as Imams, without seeking blessings upon his closest Companions also, as proof that Mir considered himself a staunch Shi‘i. Naim, “The Second Tyranny,” 26.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 11-12.
narrates hagiographic, political, and humorous anecdotes through a pseudo-historical and pseudo-autobiographical framework, there appear to be several instances where he takes sharp digs at elements of Sunni belief or behaviour. In the following anecdote, he gives a very good picture of what inter-sectarian interaction can be like in a prominently multi-sectarian setting like Hindustan:

I heard high praise of a scholar [‘ālim] and went to see him. He turned out to be a mindless mulla, who could never grasp anything subtle. No sooner had I arrived than he said—stupid that he was—‘Many young men these days have become Shi‘ah and leave no falsehood unsaid concerning the blessed elders. This rosary that you carry—made of the 'dust of the Imam'—causes a pure-minded person like me to be perturbed, for it strongly suggests that you might be so inclined too. If that is indeed the case, please leave me alone.’ I replied, 'I too had my doubts. Thank God that you turned out to be a Sunni.' That ass of a man did not get the point, and became very happy. [Thinking] that I was like him, he went on spouting more rubbish. I grew even more disgusted, and got up and left.44

Ghālib, master of ambiguity
Mirzā Aṣadullah Khān “Ghālib” (1797-1869) is another poet whose fame rests predominantly on the incredibly rich and complex verses he wrote in the ghazal genre. Although he remains very much a classical poet in terms of his art, his life span can be said to mark the transition from the pre-modern to modern period in India, and we have access to much more detailed biographical records for him than for the earlier poets. Having moved from Agra to Delhi upon marriage at an early age, towards the end of his life he witnessed the formal colonial takeover and downfall of the Mughal dynasty at close quarters as a member of the Delhi court. Although he clearly came from Sunni stock, many of his contemporaries appear to think that he became Shi‘i at some stage of his life.45 While this never became fully clear, as we shall see in the emerging discussion, Ghālib appears to have revelled in going out of his way to stake his allegiance to ‘Alī ibn Ābi Ṭalīb, with several examples like the one below appearing in both his Persian and Urdu ghazals:

I am the famous Ghālib, ask not my name and address
I am Aṣadullah, and also Aṣadullah’s slave46

44 Ibid., 96.
46 There is a play here on the word Aṣadullah, meaning Lion of God – an epithet of ‘Alī ibn Ābi Ṭalīb. Ghālib’s own name was also Aṣadullah, and he used both Ghālib and Aṣad as his takḥalluş.
Ghālib, from the friend of the Friend, we gain the fragrance of
the Friend
In the servitude of Bū Turāb,
I am absorbed in the Real

Interestingly, such expressions of devotion to ‘Alī appear to be a more
common feature in the work of this nineteenth-century poet of ambiguous
sectarian affiliation than in that of most of his other prominent
contemporaries, even those who are unambiguously Shi‘a. Perhaps it is
precisely the ambiguity concerning his sectarian identity that makes pointed
reverence to ‘Alī such an attractive theme for Ghālib. Of course, he never fails
to bring his love for ‘Alī into humorous service for justifying his own love of
wine-drinking. He has said several shē’rs on this theme, and in a letter extolling
the effect of wine on his creative temperament and bemoaning his inability to
purchase wine because of his financial distress, he exclaims:
"Oh a slave of the Saqi of Kausar, and with parched lips! What an injustice! What an
outrage!"

Notwithstanding his repeated claims of being ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib’s
passionate devotee, we do not find a record of any instance where he expressly
declared himself to be Shi‘i. There are a number of places where he claimed to
be Sunni, however, though these claims really cannot be interpreted in a
straightforward manner. Ghālib’s biographer Hālī narrates an incident where
the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah "Ẓafar" (d.1862) once remarked in
court that he had heard that Asadullah Kháñ Ghālib is shī‘i ul-mażhab. When
Ghālib heard this, he composed a few rubā‘īs to recite to the king and dissociate
himself from the charge of tashaiyō’ and rifż.

On another occasion, Ghālib straight out refers to himself as a Sunni,
but in a way which is actually mocking of Sunni practice:

It was the month of Ramazān. A Sunni maulawī came to visit
Ghālib. It was the time of the ‘asr prayer, and Ghālib asked his
servant for water. The maulawī remarked with astonishment,
"Is his excellency not fasting?" Ghālib replied, "I’m a Sunni

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47 Bū Tūrāb, meaning Father of the Dust, was an epithet of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. There is a
play on the word bū here which means ‘fragrance’ in Persian, and is also short for abū
which means ‘father’ in Arabic.
48 in the period immediately after the Indian Mutiny of 1857 when his state pension had
been stopped.
(Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1990), 89. Sāqī-i Kausar, i.e. Cupbearer of Kausar, is an
epithet of ‘Alī.
Muslim. I break my fast while four gharīs of the day [several hours of daylight] still remain.”

Since Ghālib’s purpose here is to take a jibe at Sunni practice, the anecdote paradoxically gives greater credence to the notion of Ghālib’s being Shi‘i rather than Sunni. Expressing his viewpoint through means of subtle hints is actually very much Ghālib’s way, and his poetic style has come to be associated with high degrees of ambiguity in terms of meaning. Perhaps this is the reason that despite his obvious attachment to ‘Alī and his progeny, he hardly wrote any marṣīyahs, an art that can be said to delight more in the wringing of pathos than in subtlety of wordplay. He is reported to have said that there was no marṣīyah writer like Anīs (d. 1874) or Dabīr (d. 1875) in India, nor would there ever be, and that he himself has no affinity for the art (main is maidān ka mard nahīn hūn). With respect to gauging Ghālib’s religious or sectarian views and attitudes, we are in a position where we do not have to rely solely on his poetry. The following excerpt from a letter he wrote may give us as clear a view of his religious beliefs as any we might be able to get from any of his poetic writings.

Once, overburdened by expenses and feeling the need to economise, he cut down on many items of expenditure, even to the extent of leaving off drinking. His relative, Nawwāb ‘Alā ud-Dīn Khá̄n, on his father Nawwāb Amīn ud-Dīn Khá̄n’s direction, wrote to discover the reason, including in his letter a shēr that Maulawī Hamzah Khá̄n had requested him to send to Ghālib by way of advice: “Hāfīz, as you have become old, leave the wine-tavern… The lasciviousness goes well with the prime of youth.” In reply, Ghālib outlined the state of his finances, and the reason for his abandonment of wine, which was only because of a lack of money, since a windfall from a patron from time to time would lead to a resumption of availing himself of these delights at his usual set times of the day. He directed ‘Alā ud-Dīn Khá̄n to show this letter to his father, who had asked about the reason for the discontinuation (mauqūfī) and resumption (bahālī) of Ghālib’s wine-drinking. He also instructed him to give his salutations and prayers to Hamzah Khá̄n (who had sent him the verse by Ḥāfīz):

O you who are ignorant of the pleasures of our constant drinking [ay be-khabar ze lazzat-i shurb-i madām-i mā] – well you see, this is how He gives us the drink. It is one thing to get a name as a maulawī by merely giving tuitions to the lads of petty shopkeepers [banyās] living in Darībā [an old neighbourhood of Delhi] and perusing the treatises of Abū Ḥanīfāh and dipping into the problems of menses and lochia [haiz o nifās], and quite

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51 Ḥālī, Yādgār-i Ghālib, 96-97. Shi‘i law generally determines the breaking of the fast to be ten minutes or so after the Sunnis, not hours as Ghālib humorously implies to tease the Sunni maulawī.
52 Ibid., 113-114.
53...چوں پیر شدی حافظ از میکدہ بیرون شو...
a different thing it is to implant in one’s mind the real Truth
[ḥaqīqat-i haqqā] and wahdātul-wujād by studying the writings
of the gnostics [‘urafā]!

The polytheist pagans [mushrik] are those who consider that
existence is shared by the Necessary [wājib] and the Possible
[mumkin]. The infidels [mushrik] are those who consider
Musaylimah as a partner in prophethood with the Last of the
Prophets [kḥātim ul-mursalīn]. The infidels [mushrik] are those
who consider the new Muslims equal to the Father of the Imams
[‘Ali]. Hell is for them. I am a perfect believer in the Oneness of
God [muwahhid-ḵẖāliṣ] and am a complete believer [momin-i
kāmil]. With my tongue, I say, “There is no god but God” and in
my heart I firmly believe “There exists nothing but God, and
nothing is effective in existence but God”. All the prophets are
revered [wājib ul-tāʿīzīm] and in their own times obedience was
due to them [mutaffariq ul-ītāʿat]. The prophethood ended with
Muhammad, Peace be Upon Him. He is the Seal of the Prophets
[kḥatm ul-mursalīn] and a Blessing for the Worlds [rahmat ul-lil-
ālamīn]. The end of the prophethood is the beginning of the
Imamate [maqtaʾ-i nubūwat ka matlaʾ imāmat], and Imamate is
ordained by God not by the consensus of public opinion [nah
ijmāʾī balkih min allāh]. And the Imam ordained by God is ‘Ali,
Peace Be Upon Him, then [summa] Ḥasan, then Ḥusain, and so
on till the time of Mahdī, Peace Be Upon Him. I live by this faith
and will die by it [barīn zīstam ham barīn biguzaram].

But there is just one thing more, and that is this: I consider
ibāḥat54 [to disregard the religious tenets of what is permissible
and forbidden and to make no distinction between them,
literally ‘giving liberty’] and zindiqah [heresy, atheism] as
cursed and rejected [mardūd], and wine as forbidden [sharāb ko
harām], and myself as a sinner [ʿāsī]. If I am put into hell, it will
not be so much to burn me as to add fuel to the fire of hell to
make it fiercer, so that the refuters of the Prophethood of the
Choicest of the Prophets and the Imamate of the Most Approved
One [‘Ali] [mushrikīn-ī nubūwat-ī muṣṭafawī wa imāmat-ī
murtazawī] may burn in it.

Well, listen, Maulawī Sāhib! After going without food for
several days [kayi fāqon men – implying after a lot of hard work],
you learn one couplet of Ḥāfiẓ, ‘O Ḥāfiẓ, as you become old, leave
the tavern’ and then you recite it before a man [i.e. Ghālib]
whose collection of verse, not to mention prose, is double and
treble the Diwān-ī Ḥāfiẓ; and you have not the sense to realise
that this is just one shēʾr of Ḥāfiẓ, and there are a thousand other
couplets [by him] which quite contradict it.55

54 In Hali’s original Urdu text, the word is given as ibāʾat, rather than ibāḥat, which would
make the phrase ibāʾat-i zindiqah. See Ḥālī, Yādgār-i Ghālib, 215.
55 I have followed K. H. Qadiri’s wonderfully nuanced and idiomatic translation almost
verbatim here, with some changes as well as parenthetical insertions of the original Urdu
It is a wonder that Ghalib’s sectarian affiliation still remains a subject of doubt and speculation even after such declarations were put down by him on paper. One would imagine that his views on the Imamate would take him beyond merely Tafzili Sunni territory right into Shi’i territory, but apparently not all scholars find this to be a sufficiently convincing point of view. The Italian scholar Bausani, for instance, sees the ideas expressed in this letter as a ‘blend’ of Shi’i and Sufi ideas, which is an approach typical of much Western scholarship. Moreover, he considers these ideas to be representative not so much of early Shi’ism as of late post-Safavid Iranian Shi’ism. Certainly, when a person is as negligent of observing the usual religious rituals, such as fasting and praying, as Ghalib was, it is difficult to gain any indication from that whether he performed these according to Shi’a or Sunni law. Even Hali, Ghalib’s biographer and close confidant, who, being a Sunni himself, favoured the view that Ghalib was a Shi’i, tended to stop short of any absolute statement regarding Ghalib’s sectarian affiliation, conceding that he could also be a Tafzili. Furthermore, one of the chief obstacles to Ghalib being a confirmed Shi’i appears to be his being a spiritual disciple of the family of Maulana Fakhr ud-Dîn, a Sunni mystic. This relationship is cited as one of the chief reasons why Ghalib’s burial took place according to Sunni custom.

Conclusion
With the onset of colonial modernity, a number of trends and movements emerged in Muslim societies which have now come to be identified by the term “reformist”. Many Muslim “reformists” and “modernisers” appear to have...
absorbed colonial notions and attitudes about their own cultures at the conscious or unconscious level. The notion of “sectarianism” appears to be one of them. The discourse of many modernist reformers came to reflect colonial perceptions of sectarianism as a “negative, out-dated discourse through which the masses were controlled by fanatical divines and priests”, a discourse that was moreover conducive to prejudice, violence, and “extremism”. Of chief concern to a new generation of native intellectuals was the perceived role of sectarianism in the decline of their religion and civilisation in the modern period, and in being a very real obstacle to Muslim progress. It is against the background of such a discourse and such perceptions that the nineteenth-century Indian educationist Sayyid Aḥmad Kẖān banned the discussion of sectarian differences among Shi’a and Sunni students at his newly established Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College in Aligarh 1875. If Muslim youth were to progress, they had to rise above the curse of these petty differences. More than a century later, the same sentiments and notions can be discerned behind the secularising urge evident in much political activism in nation-states like India and Pakistan, for a “neutral” environment is not only thought to be the only kind that can ensure smooth and conflict-free interaction among the citizenry, but is also considered to be an attainable object.

The discussion of Saudā, Mīr, and Ghālib’s literary acts takes place in a world where notions such as the ones above, if they existed, did not exist in these particular forms. We see sectarian differences being evoked, acknowledged, played upon, and even enjoyed without the situation always reaching some kind of instantaneous flashpoint of sectarian “tension”. While it would be incorrect to say, as is often done, that one’s sect did not matter at all in the pre-modern period, inter-sectarian relations, the daily negotiation of sectarian identity, and sectarian identity itself during this time are issues which do not respond well to simplistic or singular characterisations. Although sectarian violence is often spoken of as being a modern phenomenon, it would not do to sketch too benign a picture of the past either. It is important, though, to emphasise that sectarian leanings were not, and are not, the most vital or defining factor in determining the nature of everyday interaction. Also, while there is always the possibility of tension, differences in historical and theological perspectives between Sunnis and Shi’a were not always such taboo subjects as they are frequently portrayed to be, and it is not only in a “secular space” that “civilised” and peaceable interactions can be seen to have taken place.

The evocation of sectarian “difference” in the samples of pre-modern Persian and Urdu poetry and other works analysed in this paper might also help us think more deeply about the concept of “difference” itself. Contrary to some recent arguments that sectarian affiliation can be discerned through evidence of the ritual practice of pilgrimage and paying one’s respects at the shrines of certain historical personages of spiritual importance, rather than

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60 Jones, Shi’a Islam, 24-26.
through theological beliefs, in the Indian environment, as no doubt also elsewhere in the Indian Ocean World and beyond, it appears difficult to pin down sectarian affiliation from rituals and expressions of respect and devotion to the Prophet’s household, as we can see in the writings and practice of a figure like Mirzā Aṣadullah Khan Ghālib.

Najam Haider gives the example of the scholar ibn Barniyah (d. early 11th c.) who appears to have been considered an Imāmī even though he believed in thirteen Imams rather than twelve (a belief which fell outside the purview of Imāmī doctrine). He argues that ibn Barniyah was accepted as a Shi'i because he had participated in many pilgrimages that Imāmīs typically participated in. Haider’s view is that an observable proto-Imāmī identity crystallised in early 8th c. Kufa in an urban environment marked by a growing correlation between communal identity and ritual practice, and that with the passage of time participating in large processions to certain holy sites became an indicator or a “clear public declaration” of communal identity. Najam Haider. “Prayer, Mosque, and Pilgrimage: Mapping Shi'i Sectarian Identity in 2nd/8th Century Kufa.” Islamic Law and Society 16.2 (2009): 151-71. Rula Abisaab critiques Haider’s approach of taking such ritual practice as “useful shorthand in ascertaining an individual’s communal self-identification” by citing theologically distinct communities’ sharing of supposedly proto-Imāmī ritual practices of pilgrimage and mourning rights through to the modern era (class lecture at McGill University, 2014).
Bibliography


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