

THE ROLE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION OF ASHUR KHANAS - UNDER THE QUTB- SHAHIS-A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract

The Ashur Khanas under the Qutb Shahi dynasty played a pivotal role in the religious, social, and cultural landscape of the Deccan. Established primarily for the observance of Muharram and other Shia rituals, these institutions were central to the propagation of Shia beliefs and practices in Golconda. Patronized by the Qutb Shahi rulers, who were staunch adherents of Shi'ism, Ashur Khanas became focal points for communal gatherings, religious discourses, and mourning processions commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussain. These institutions not only served as places of worship but also functioned as centers of social cohesion, where people from various strata of society participated in rituals. The architectural grandeur of Ashur Khanas, with their intricate stucco work, calligraphy, and Persian influences, reflects the deep devotion and royal patronage they received. The famous Badshahi Ashur Khana in Hyderabad, built by Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, stands as a testimony to the spiritual and cultural significance of these institutions. The rituals conducted in Ashur Khanas, including the recitation of marsiyas (elegies) and majlis (religious assemblies), reinforced the spiritual and emotional connection of the populace with the tragic events of Karbala.

The Qutb Shahi rulers not only provided financial support for the maintenance of these institutions but also facilitated the influx of scholars, poets, and religious figures who enriched the intellectual and literary traditions associated with Shi'ism. These institutions played a crucial role in shaping the identity of the Shia community in the Deccan, fostering a distinct religious and cultural milieu that endured beyond the fall of the dynasty. The intertwining of politics and religion in the patronage of Ashur Khanas underscores their significance in the broader historical and socio-political context of the Qutb Shahi period. The influence of these institutions continued even under later rulers, highlighting their enduring legacy in Deccan history.

Introduction.

The Muslim religion institutions played a similar role in the political life of the contemporary Muslim society. For example, the mosque, besides being basically a Centre of religions and spiritual activity was also associated with many important acts in the Muslim kingdoms. it was the place where the coronation ceremony of some of the rulers was performed the coronation of Aladdin Hassan Bahmani Shah. the founder of the Bahmani sultanate, was performed in the mosque of Qutbuddin Mubarak Shan Khilji situated at Dowlatabad.

Considerable work has been done on the various aspects of the history of the Muslim religious institutions in medieval deccan the period under study (ad 1290-1724) constitutes a distinctive epoch in the history. The emergence of live states as a result of the decline of the barman: kingdom not began a new era in the political history but also brought a number of changes in the socioreligious life of the people if the deccan. there was a free

exchange of the cultural and religious values between the two main constituents of the society. Hindus and Muslim the result of it was that the society inspires of its diversity got knitted together and also, establishment of Qutb Shahi rule in deccan region.

The Ashur Khanas.

The Ashur Khana which is also called Imam Bara, Bargah, Alava, Dargah is a building which houses the conventional copies of standards carried by Imam Hussain called Alams. The Alam, which is the main item of the Ashur Khana is usually assigned to a martyr or Karbala, though it was given to Hazrat Abbas, the brother of Imam Hussain during the battle of Karbala, it was the same Alam, which was later carried by Bashir Ibne Nooman¹⁰) to convey the message of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain in Madina. It was hereafter that the Alam became a conventional sign of the martyrs of Karbala. The Alams are usually assigned to the following members of the family of Imam Hussain.

1. Hazrat Abul Fazalil Abbas; Son of Hazrat Ali, the Alamdar of the battle of Karbala.
2. Hazrat Ali Akbar; 18 years old son of Imam Hussain.
3. Hazrat Ali Asghar; Infant son of Imam Hussain.
4. Hazrat Qasim Ibne Hasan; Son of Imam Hasan, Brother of Imam Hussain.
5. Hazrat Oan and Hazrat Muhammad; two sons of Abdullah Bin Muhammad Jaffer and Hazrat Zainab.
6. Hazrat Zainab Bihte Ali; Daughter of Hazrat Ali and Sister of Imam Hussain.
7. Hazrat Zain-ul-Abideen; Son of Imam Hussain.
8. Hazrat Sakina Binte Hussain; Daughter of imam Hussain. In addition to these, the Alams are also assigned to the Masoomeen. The Alam in- fact is not a new innovation; it existed even in Pre-Islamic period, as an emblem of the armies. But it did change in shape and material as the time progressed.

During the Qutb Shahi period the Alams were made of metals like gold, silver, copper or bronze, in different shapes yet their main parts and their significance remained the same. The origin and the early history of the institution of Ashurkhana in other parts of the Muslim world is not known. It is also not known whether any of them were set up in the Telugu country during the period of the early Qutbshahis i.e. Sultan Quli and Jamshid Quli. The Ashurkhanas that figure during the period under study naturally belong to the later half of the 16th century A.D. covering the reigns of Ibrahim Qutubshah and his successor Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah. They number about half a dozen, and are situated mainly in and around the city of modern Hyderabad.

Gebian: The uppermost part of the Alam is shaped into a number of rectangular strips called Gebian. The edges of these are rounded off and sometimes designed. The number is not fixed and depends on the suitability and the desire of the craftsman, the central Gebee usually bigger in size than the others is shaped like a sword and is called Zulfeqar. Sometimes a Tughra is placed over it.

Sherja: These are cylindrical tubes or even rods of metal bent and fixed around an Alam. The upper part of the Sherja is usually made into the shape of a lion or a Python. Hazrat Ali is called 'the lion of Allah'. The lion, therefore symbolizes Hazrat Ali. The Python does not have any significance in Islam. But it is believed, more so, in India, that it sucks the evils of life, when used as a symbol. The Alams in the Qutb Shahi Ashur Khanas have these two j symbols, in general.

Hatelee: It is an area marked with the sign like the palm of hand right in the middle of the Paitha. It is in this part of the Alam that the artisan shows his mastery by carving complicated designs of Tughras.

Paitha: The main part of the Alam surrounded by Sherja is called Paitha. it is in this part of the Alam that the Tughras like names of Panjetan, Kalema etc., are engraved or carved.

Bodi: It is a hollow cylindrical tube which forms the lower part of the Alam, it is usually strong so that it can hold the weight of the Alam, when it is installed on Naiza. Its strength depends on the size and weight of the Alam.

Naiza: It is a strong wooden rod to which, the lower part of the Alam is fixed. It is on this rod that the Alam is installed. The length and the circumference of the rod differs from Alani to Alam, depending on its size and weight. The Naiza is usually fixed to a Chowkhi placed on the floor.

It is difficult to say when the first Alam was installed in the Deccan. Though the Azadari started after the declaration of Shiaism in Golconda/2) Yet we do not have any Alam of the early period. The oldest Alam is the Hussaini Alam of Golconda installed during the period of Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah. It has an inscription over the Hatelee in which the Sultan's name is engraved with the prefix Gulam-e-Ali.® This Alam has all the parts described above and is the work of a master Craftsman. The perfection shows that it was not the first Alam raised in Golconda Kingdom. After this a number of Ashur Khanas were built with Alams in them. They are the following.

Some of the Ashur Khanas like.

1. Baad Shahi Ashur Khana.
2. Ashur Khana-e-Hussaini Alam.
3. Ashur Khana-e-Sartooq-e-Mubarek
4. Ashur Khana-e-Nal-e-Mubarek.
5. Allava-e-Bibi.
6. Bargah-e-Hazrat-e-Abbas.
7. Allava-e-Hazrat-e-Qasim.
8. Ashur Khana-e-Sartooq-e-Hussaini
9. Ashur Khana-e-Panj Bhai
10. Ashur Khana-e-Maki Naal Saheb

11. Hussaini Alam Golconda.

The Alams became conventional signs and were held in great esteem not only by the Muslims but also by the non-r Muslims. Hindus in large number paid homage to them and considered them sacred. Zore confirms this writing that the whole population, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, used to pay homage to Alams in Ashur Khanas and while doing so the differences between the rulers and the ruled and the differences of culture, religion and caste were forgotten.

Nigam in his scholarly paper on Ashur Khanas has analysed the reason of the devotion of non-Muslims to the Alam. According to him the legitimate question will arise: What should be the reason for such a wide popularity of Ashur Khanas and Alams in India? or why did the Hindus in such a large number followed the sanctity of Alams and worshiped them? It will be over simplifying the issue, if we simply presume that the Hindus made grants to erect Ashur Khanas and worshiped Alams, Just to please their new masters. A study of the socio-religious conditions of the Deccan during the period reveals that Hinduism by that time was under a great spell of the Bhakti cult. The doctrines of the Bhakti cult laid more emphasis on the emotional.

Aspect of worship. Where a devotee was expected to surrender himself before God for the fulfilment of his worldly desires. No doubt the philosophy of the Bhakti cult of Hinduism provided deeper meaning for personal communication with God through the emotional love and ecstasy, but the common folk laid their faith more on the rituals and th religious ceremonies prescribed by the priestly class. The construction of religious shrines, frequent visits to temples to make religious offerings and have Darshan, recital of mantras and Bhajans in praise of one's own deity, Aradhya deva were considered as acts of piety.

Ashur Khana and Alams which were the direct outcome of emotional attachment to Imam Hussain, offered an analogy to Hindus, who found in them an identical situation. The Alam which contains the relics of Imam Hussain, was not a new phenomenon to the Hindus. The placing of personal relics of the Jain, Buddhist and Hindu saints inside the religious shrines had been an ancient practice in South India. The Hatelee representing the palm of a hand bearing Tughra and inscribing the names of Shia Imams provided a fresh, imagery to the eyes of the Hindu devotees, who had a long standing tradition in India to worship the feet Padas and palms of the Hindu divinity.

Nigam's study strengthens the view that during the Qutb shahi period, the devotion to the Alams by Hindus was not under the pressure of religious persecution. The people had freedom of worship and were allowed by the ruler to pay homage to the Alams according to their own religious outlook. It was due to this that we find a large number of Ashur Khanas in and around Hyderabad which were constructed and maintained by the Hindus.

Beside the Alam, Zari is another important conventional sign of the Ashur Khanas. Some of the Ashur Khanas have Zari in them, in place of Alams like Panje-Shah-e-Vilayat and Allava-e-Yateeman. Zari in the beginning was a simple wooden structure made in the

shape of a grave. But soon it assumed different shapes and forms. Even the material with which it was made differed. Zari basically is a replica of the grave made in wood. It is covered with cloth and small Alams are installed on both sides of it. Four handles are provided, two on both sides to life it. It is believed that the first Zari was made by Amir Taimur. The Turkish manuscript of Tuzuk quoted by Prince Mirza Hyder Sheikh in his book 'Alam-e-Hydri' reads as follows:

"When I prepared to leave Karbala I was in great pain and sorrow. The people of Karbala wanted to provide me relief, therefore, they presented to me a Zari which was prepared by the soil taken from Roza. I accepted this with great honor and always carried it along with me. The Persian translations of Tuzuk however do not have this passage. The author claims that in most of the translations it was deleted as it did not have the religious sanction of the people of other sects. In any case Zari was considered sacred and used as conventional sign in the Qutb Shahi Kingdom. Therefore it exists in two of the major Ashur Khanas of the period.

Nishan is a relic, the word itself means a symbol. It is usually an impression of the hand or foot of a 'Masoom'. The Ashur Khana of Moula Ali has an impression of Hazrat All's hand on stone, while the Ashur Khana-e-Khadm-e- Rasool has an impression of the foot of Prophet Muhammad, the Nishan is held in great esteem, as it is usually the result of a 'Mojiza'.

Parcham or banner is a very common conventional sign used over the Ashur Khanas or along with the Azadari processions. This is mostly black or green in colour. It is hoisted over a long pole and usually has an Alam or Panja over the top. Sometimes verses of the Holy Quran, Hadith or Tughra are knitted or painted on it. A number of parchams used during the Qutb Shahi period are preserved with the Mujavers of the QutbShahi Ashur Khanas.

The Panja or the palm of the hand is a very old conventional sign. It is made of metal in the shape of a pain with open fingers. The five fingers of the palm represent 'Panjetan'. In addition it is believed that it signifies the protection of Imam to the Azadars. Panja, which is either installed independently or along with the Nishan had been very popular during the Qutb Shahi period. A number of Ashur Khanas such as Baad Shahi Ashur Khana, Panja-e-Shah-e-Vilat have Panjas in them.

Zuljana which is more common in the north compared to Deccan, is a horse, selected to serve as a replica of Imam Hussain's horse Zuljana. It is not kept permanently at Ashur Khanas but brought on the occassion. The Azadari processions starting from Ashur Khanas usually have it in the front. Along with the conventional signs of the Ashur Khanas there are a few articles, which are essentially kept in the Ashur Khana. They are Dhattee, Mمبر, Ooddan, Allava, Tughra, Candle and Agarbatti stand, Ghala.

The Dhatee is a rectangular piece of cloth tied over the Bodi of the Alam and hangs down to cover the Naiza. The length and the type of the cloth depends upon the need. Sometimes costly cloth especially made for it is used, for example the Dhatees of the Alams

at Baad Shahi Ashur Khana were made of Zarbafti cloth in which the Ayats from the Holy Quran were knitted. The Dhatees are also presented to the Alams as Nazr. For this purpose a large number of them are prepared every year and sold.

Mimber is a platform over which, the Zakir or Marsiya-Khan sits while addressing the Majlis. The Mimber like other articles could be of any size or material, but wooden Mimbars are more common. It consists of a rectangular platform called Arsha, connected by steps to climb over it. The whole structure is covered with cloth. Sometimes two Alams are installed on each side of the platform. It is highly esteemed as it is assigned to the Prophet and is considered as his innovation.

Ooddan is a metallic vessel made in a special shape, it is meant to burn Ood, a type of incense, in it, inside or outside the Ashur Khana. The devotees too carry Ood to Ashur Khana and burn it there, while paying respect to the Alams. The ash of the Ooddan is considered to be sacred and is given to the devotees, whenever required, it is this ash called Oodi which is applied on the forehead by the Hindus like Vibhuti of the Hindu temples. Candle and Agarbatti stands are needed in an Ashur Khana as the devotees bring 'Mombati' and Agarbatti' along with the Nazr. The purpose behind it is to provide light and perfume to the Ashur Khana as an act of thanks giving.

Allava-e-Bibi has beautifully constructed Allavas in the middle of the courtyard. Tughra is usually an artistic presentation of some sacred names like Panjetan or verses of the Quran. In addition to these some Tughras contain the pictures of Masoomeen, Zuljana or even the scenes from the battlefield of Karbala, it is with the help of these Tughras that the Ashur Khanas are decorated. The Qutb Shahi Ashur Khanas of Hyderabad City like Bargah-e-Hazrat Abbas have a number of excellent Tughras. The devotees while coming to the Ashur Khanas bring Nazr. Generally, it consists of flowers, Dhatee, Candles, agarbatti etc. The non-Muslims bring Nazr according to their traditions and customs, it usually consists of parched rice, coconut, flowers etc. In addition to this they present money to the Ashur Khana as Nazr. This is purely optional and no devotee is forced to perform it. The money is dropped in a cash box called Ghala which is kept inside the Ashur Khanas.

The Ashur Khanas have two pictures painted very distinctly over the walls at the entrance. A fairy horse and a lion. In fact the Ashur Khana is distinguished from other buildings due to these pictures. The fairy horse is believed to have carried Prophat Muhammad to the skies during Mairaj and the lion represents Hazrat Ali, who has a title Sher-e-Khuda.

The Ashur Khanas do not have a set pattern of architecture as the mosques have. They, therefore, are built in any style. Their number is large, some of them do not have permanent buildings. Therefore only those Ashur Khanas have been taken up for study, which are important and have their own buildings. Allava is a small place marked somewhere in the courtyard of the Ashur Khana. Usually the place is enclosed with brick work. It is at this place that the fire is lit during the nights of the Muhrram. People, mostly non-Muslims gather

round this and recite poems and sing the folk songs written in memory of the Martyrs of Karbala in their languages. The Alams when raised are taken round these Allavas.

All the Ashurkhanas of the period under review, no doubt, have Alams but one Ashurkhana of this period, situated at Maula Ali, contains the impression of Hazrat Ali's hand on stone. And the Alams of many of these Ashurkhanas contained the relics associated with life of Imams. An account of the Ashurkhanas of this period is given below: Maula Ali Ashurkhana : The earliest Ashurkhana known to have been set up in the Telugu country is that of Maula Ali, situated near Malkajgiri, about 10 miles away from the Old Hyderabad city. It was built in the year 1576 A.D. (986 A.H.) to house the impression of Hazrat Ali's right hand, which is believed to have been found on a rock on the Maula Ali hillock by Yakhut, an official of Ibrahim Qutbshah.

Ashurkhana-e-Nal-e-Mubarak : This is another Ashurkhana built during the reign of Ibrahim Qutbshah. It is situated, now, near Shahi Mahal located near the (Eastern) Charkaman (old Hyderabad). This Ashurkhana got its name from the Nal (a crescent-like iron piece of the helmet of Imam Hussain broken during the battle of Karbala) contained in its Alam. It was brought from Karbala by certain Sayyids, Nir Miran and Nurul Hada, and was given to a dervish of Bijapur. It was obtained by Ibrahim Qutbshah. who received it with honours, got it fixed to an Alam and housed it at some place in Golkonda fort.¹⁴³ In the reign of Muhammad Quli Qutbshah, it was brought from there and housed in the Ashurkhana built at the present place.

Bagh - e - Hazrat : Bagh-e-Hazrat, is another Ashurkhana belonging to the period of Ibrahim Qutbshah. It is situated inside the Salarjng Palace, Hyderabad. The Alam housed in it contains a piece of the iron coat of Hazrat Abdul Fazal Abbas. It was brought from Karbala by Mir Miran and Nurul Hada, the same Sayyid brothers mentioned above, during the reign of Ibrahim Qutbshah.

Hussaini Alam o f Golkonda : This Ashurkhana is situated on the road leading from Fathe Darwaza to Balahissar Darwaza inside the fort of Golkonda. The Alam in this building was set up in the year 1592 A.D. by Muhammad Quli Qutbshah, whose name along with those of the 14 Imams is inscribed on it.

Badshahi Ashurkhana : Situated atPattargatti (Old Hyderabad) was the first Ashurkhana set in the new city of Hyderabad, built by Muhammad Quli Qutbshah. It was built at a cost of Rs. 66,000.¹⁴⁷ It appears from the inscriptions engraved over the central niche of the Ashurkhana that its construction continued from A.D. 1592 to 1596.¹⁴⁸ Mir Muhammad Mumin, a Shia divine from Iran, who was the Qutbshahi Wazier, played a crucial role in its construction.

Hussaini Alam (New) : This Ashurkhana, situated in the lane of the same name (Old Hyderabad) contains the Alam of Imam Hussain, who attained martyrdom in the battle of Karbala. It was brought from Karbala by a certain Ali. Aga, who was made the caretaker (Mujaver) of that Ashurkhana..

It appears that the setting up of Ashurkhanas and the performance of Muharram festival connected with them were important features of the religious life of the Muslims belonging especially to the Shia sect. The Qutb Shahi rulers, who were staunch Shias, appear to have encouraged their establishment, and extended liberal patronage for their maintenance with a view to popularize the Shia sect in the country. Many of the Ashurkhanas, mentioned above, were granted lands and allowances for their upkeep, by the State. Muhammad Quli QutbShahi is said to have spent sixty thousand Huns towards the payment of the employees of the Ashurkhanas and their other expenses. Every year he used to spend another four lakh Huns, which was the annual revenue of the city of Hyderabad, in feeding the Syeds and the Ulema during the Muharram festival connected with the Ashurkhdnas. Another twelve thousand Huns were distributed to the needy and the poor on the same occasion every year. These institutions became very popular in the Seventeenth century A.D. when a number of them were set up in the city of Hyderabad and in other towns and villages where Muslims lived.

The ceremonies of the Ashur Khana:

The Ashur Khana became very important during the reign of Abdullah Qutb shah due to an incident. One day Abdullah Qutb Shah was returning from Hyderabad on his favorite elephant Murat. The river Musi was in floods and the water was flowing over the bridge. The elephant came upto the bridge and stopped, it was strange of the elephant to do so, as he was tamed and trained for the royal use. The Mahawat got confused and used his Ankus time and again to make the elephant move. The elephant got annoyed, threw the Mahawat down and stamped him to death. Then the elephant ran away to the jungle along with the Sultan, it was twenty seventh of Zilhija and the month of Muhrram was just three days ahead. The news was brought to Maa Sahib Hyat Bakshi Begum. Immediately orders were given to all the people that they should go out to the jungle and try to trace the Sultan. A day and a night passed but no trace of the elephant was found. Hayat Bakshi Begum could neither touch the food nor could sleep due to the worry. She ordered that the food and water cans should be hung over the trees in the jungle so that the Sultan.

Could get the food and water, in case the elephant happened to pass near any such tree. Three anxious days and nights passed but the elephant could not be traced. It was amidst this anxiety that Maa sahib sighted the moon of the Muhrram. She immediately took a vow in the name of Imam Hussain that if Abdullah returned safe, she would tie a gold langer weighing forty mounds round the waist of the Sultan and would bring him on foot from the gate of the fort to the Ashur Khana-e-Hussaini Alam, the Sultan returned safe, the very next day on his elephant. Maa Sahib sent word that he should be stopped at the gate. All the gold smiths of the city were summoned and a gold chain was prepared. Carpets were spread from the gate of the Golconda Fort to the Ashur Khana-e-Hussaini Alam. The sultan was made to walk the distance. The longer was then broken into pieces and distributed among the poor and needy.

The ceremony of langer from then onwards became popular among the people and langer was brought during Muhrram by everyone from an ordinary man, Sunni, Shia or Hindu according to his means.

The episode has not found place in any contemporary source. It has been described by Khaja Gulam Hussain in detail yet the popularity of the langer ceremony which was performed by a large number of people although the period of early Asif Jahs provide enough ground to believe in it. The ceremony is not seen or practiced anywhere in or outside Hyderabad in any other Ashur Khana except Hussaini Alam.

The Alam was installed in the Ashur Khana as soon as the moon of the month of Muhrram was sighted. It attracted a large number of people irrespective of religion allthrough the ten days of Muhrram. It was on the 10th of the Muhrram that the Alam was taken out in a procession. As soon as the Alam left the Ashur Khana, the Naqaras were placed upside down. It was a ceremony carried out only when a Sultan died during the Qutb Shahi period. The Alam in the beginning was carried on foot, but it was found difficult due to large crowds, so it was later carried on an elephant, it was led by another elephant carrying Nishan, fourteen Alams made of steel followed Bibi Ka Alam. These were placed on large Naizas and were taken on run. After covering a distance, these were placed on the ground and the Alambardars took rest, when the Bibi Ka Alam covered a distance, they again started. The Alam procession passed through Yaqutpura, Kaman-e- Shaik Faiz, Kotla-e-Alijah, Charminar, Gulzar Houz, Panje Shah, Darulshifa and ended at the bank of the river Musi. Thousands of people accompanied the procession participating in their traditional style. The Shias performed Maltam while the others followed in their own way. A large number of Hindus carried Oodaan along with the procession and burnt incense all through the way. The Alam was removed from its Naiza at the bank of the river Musi and placed in a large tray it was then carried back to the Ashur Khana reciting Noha on the way. When the elephant returned to the Ashur Khana, the Hindu women, who waited there with water and milk pots over their heads washed its feet pouring milk and water/27' The ceremony of the Ashur Khana is still current and is performed in the same way. Even now a large number of Hindu women with milk and water pots can be seen washing the feet of the elephant at the Ashur Khana.

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