Criticisms Directed Against the Men’s Guilds

Given their popularity and public visibility, it is perhaps not surprising that the matami guruhan are a topic of controversy among many Hyderabadi Muslims. Criticisms from Sunnis tend to be general, directed against devotional practices embraced by the groups rather than against the guruhan themselves. Several persons whom I questioned asserted flatly that there is no Quranic warrant for the practice of matam, the devotion that defines the guilds. Wahhabi-minded Muslims went further, claiming that the guilds’ veneration of Husain is so overdone as to elevate him to sainthood.

But the most pointed critiques arose from persons within the Shiite community itself. In the course of my work I met a half-dozen young Shiites, men in their twenties and early thirties, who frequently attend majalis sponsored by various guruhan but who told me that they have never taken the step of becoming formal members of a particular association. When questioned privately about this, several of them explained that many of the guruhan are notorious for wrangling with each other, most commonly over issues of authority and leadership. My informants felt that if they joined one particular organization they would be forced to take sides in such disputes. One respondent said that he attends many of the services organized by Parwaneh Shabbir; nevertheless, he declined membership so as to avoid what he called the obligation of participating in the dawreh-ye majalis or “round of liturgies”: guild members will spend a long evening on several nights during Muharram wandering the city going to one majlis after another. “Once you’re a member,” he grimaced, “you’re expected to do the whole dawreh. If you don’t, people ask, ‘Where were you?’ I like to be able to go to as many majalis as I want without worrying what people will say.”

D. Pinault, The Shiites
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When he voiced this complaint, I demurred and questioned whether there was really so much social pressure on *guruh* adherents to attend liturgies; but in a separate conversation another informant offered corroboration of this complaint: “If I belonged to a *guruh*, then fellow members might get angry whenever I went to someone else’s *majlis* instead of theirs. By not being a member of any *guruh* I keep my independence.”

Older members of the Shiite community who found fault with the *guruhan* tended to claim that guild-members are ignorant of Islam and of *shari'ah* or the prescriptions of Islamic law. One such critic complained:

The problem with these groups is that they have no idea of *wudu’* [ritual ablutions], no idea of *namaz* [Quranically mandated prayer] and all the regulations that go with it. Their idea of prayer is to fling off their shirts and start beating their chests as soon as they enter an *ashurkhana*. *Matam* is the only kind of prayer they know.

I tried to remind this critic that in any *guruh* members strip only in undertaking *matam* with implements, an exercise reserved for the limited period of the eighth through tenth of Muharram. He waved aside my objection and persisted:

The problem is that their level of education is low; they don’t know Islam. What can you expect? A lot of these groups are made up mostly of boys; what do they know of Islam? Masoomeen’s a good example. It’s a bunch of boys, a gang of young rowdies.

I replied that Masoomeen members seemed disciplined rather than rowdy in the *majalis* I had observed, but this did not deter him from his opinion at all.

Another critic, a self-described traditionalist and a highly educated university graduate in his mid-thirties, objected to the very concept of ritualized grief incorporated into the guild liturgies:

What I don’t like is the groups’ idea of *matam* on schedule. *Matam* is supposed to be a spontaneous show of grief; how can you schedule it? These groups go around from one *ashurkhana* to another; they have one *matam-majlis* at seven, another at eight o’clock, another at nine. If *matam* means you feel real sorrow, how can you plan ahead of time to feel that way at seven o’clock and eight o’clock and so forth? How can you schedule your grief if it’s real? Look, when you feel sorrow, when you hear of something terrible that’s happened to someone in your family, someone you love, the way we love Ahl-e Bayt, you take out your