

4 Sounding Pain

Public-Private Aspects of Shi'a Women's Sonic Practices in Muharram

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Abstract

This chapter listens to the sonic landscape of Muharram *majlises* (ritual mourning) as an interpretive tool to understand the formation of collective and individual agency within the Shi'i community, a double minority community in the Indian context. The chapter focuses on the interiority of the sound, performed by the community women in the closed cloisters of the *imambaras*. While male mourning rituals are brought to the social exterior by microphones and phone cameras, women's laments and chest-beating remain exclusively private sonic practices. Is the interiority of female sonic landscapes of mourning susceptible to the larger socio-religious context that the community negotiates with? I reflect on how the sonic offers an understanding of the trans-/multilocal connections that the community inherits and develops.

Keywords: ritual mourning, Indian Shi'a, Muharram, sonic piety, Shi'i women

On Thursday afternoons, groups of Shi'i women, some in black *burqa*, some in their usual saris with their heads and torsos veiled, gather for a lament ritual in the *imambaras* of Kolkata. After they leave, the men arrive to do the same. The imambara is the congregational site to mourn the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad who died in the battle of Karbala (680 CE). The Muharram ritual is scheduled from the 3rd Muharram month in the Islamic calendar culminating in the final day—Ashura, the 10th—when in public processions Imam Husayn's martyrdom is commemorated through the chanting of *nawha* (elegy) with

vigorous rhythmic chest-beating and self-flagellation. The private mourning sessions by Shi'a men and women continue inside the *imambaras* during the Muharram days and on Thursdays throughout the year. In a multi-aural, heterogeneous, and postcolonial city like Kolkata, such sacred sounds in public *ashura* processions navigate and negotiate the multiple dimensions of public space in both symbolic and physical ways.

Auditory enactments like reading of the *nawha* and crying “Haye Hasan Haye Husayn” transcend the community’s physical locational boundaries to become a part of the sensory physicality of the city. To understand such auditory enactments Steven Feld (1982) introduced the term *acoustemology*, a sonic way of knowing and being in the world. It remains a central interpretive key to understand the auditory multiplicity of Islamic sonic phenomena as sites of contestation and reclamation of the public sphere (Eisenberg 2009; Eisenlohr 2018). By exploring the “ethical listening” of the mediated sound, these studies have brought out the possibility of the presence of religious counterpublics within an authoritarian state (Hirschkind and Larkin 2008). They have also explored the spatial politics enacted through the performance of religious sound in a contested public space where Muslims are the minority (Eisenlohr 2019). Patrick Eisenlohr has initiated a reading of Muharram as a contested sonic site of Shi'a *acoustemological* citizenship in Mumbai and analyzed the publicity of the Shi'i embodied sound in connection to the Hindu-Muslim communal factors and the intra-religious rivalry between Sunnis and Shi'as (Eisenlohr 2019). My essay takes cues from Eisenlohr's analytical framework to engage with the private sonic rituals performed by Shi'i women inside the *imambaras* to study: 1) how these private and intimate acts of sounding in the relative spatial autonomy of the interior spaces exemplify the contestations of the Shi'as as a double minority community in the Hindu-majority urbanism of Kolkata; 2) how the sonic values of women's ritual performances articulate the regional community's tryst with various transnational and multi-local Shi'i networks.

Women take part in the gender-segregated lament ritual, called *majlis*, in the exclusive interiority of the *imambaras*. The male *majlis* has direct interface with the public in terms of the use of the *imambara* courtyard as the extension of the interior ritual, the use of microphones and sometimes video recordings and, in more recent years, the ubiquitous cell phone cameras. Male mourners record, edit, and post stills or small audiovisual clips of the sermon and mourning sessions on social media. Through such movements between the *sanctum sanctorum*—where the replica of Imam Husayn's *rowza* (mausoleum) is kept—and the open streets, between the transcendental and technological mediation, the private-public divide becomes more fluid for the

male mourners than for women. Although *majlis* sessions take place inside the *imambaras*, these events can be understood as directly corresponding to the contests and negotiations in the public sphere of urban Kolkata and responding to the virtual network that reconfigures a Shi'a public online. But the complete interiority of women's sounding practices with prohibition on the use of cell phone cameras or any other recording device during the mourning ritual and complete reliance upon the traditional local *nawhas* make it more challenging for the researcher to consider these women's sonic practices as a site of acoustemological citizenship.

By exploring a private set of sound practices performed by Shi'i women, which are imperceptible to outsiders, as they are enacted in the interiority of the *imambaras* and publicly inaudible for not being amplified, I suggest that even Muslim gendered privacy is integrally connected to everyday urban contestations,¹ and that women's sonic practices show dimensions of acoustemological citizenship. Crucial methodological issues are raised by the scholars of the sonic dimension of Islam by invoking the experience of transduction—that is movement of sound across media—and sonic atmosphere, and the perception of the “felt-body” (Helmreich 2015; Eisenlohr 2018; 2019). In these theorizations, embodied voice, rather than voice in the metaphoric sense, becomes a crucial mediator in forging connections with the divine, while also contextualizing sonic practices in a specific socio-religious milieu that makes such soundings possible (Eisenlohr 2018, 3–4). While the public sounding practices of Muharram have been widely discussed, my research addresses the spatially private dimensions of Muharram sonic events and posits them in connection to the multiple transformations in the public sphere. Eisenlohr resolves the binary between the sonic in itself and culturally attuned bodies and selves that perceive and perform sound in specific ways. The notion of embodied voice here, as Eisenlohr explicates, is built upon the socio-cultural context where the sounding practices are enacted and where linguistic elements embody religious emotion. It also focuses on the affective turn that sound brings to effect, articulating and suggesting movements. What Eisenlohr proposes is a critical engagement with transduction and historically specific sonic atmosphere, prompting a study of religion as performance,

1 In the study of urban religion, the ritual has been observed as a set of public practices that represents forms of aspiration, competition, and negotiations of the community in a religiously diverse urban space. Following Peter van der Veer it can be commented that a religious ritual is a “construction of self” that integrates the practitioners as a community and posits a symbolic boundary between them and the “outsiders” (Van der Veer 1994, 11). My essay, by reading women's intimate sounding practices inside the *imambaras* as possible sites of urban contestation, intervenes into the public-private dichotomy in the understanding of religion as a site of urban contestation.

with public embodied practices (Asad 1993; 2003; de Vries 2008) based on the sensational use of the media (Meyer 2005; 2009; Hirschkind 2006).

The intrinsic link between the propagation of sound and space makes space a very important category in sound studies. Sound emanating from private sonic practices by men and women cannot be imagined outside that space; the site of the *imambaras* where sound gets produced and the route that sound traverses qualify auditory experiences as both of sound and of the social. The sonic gestures remain space-specific for simulating “the position of sound sources in the environment and the volume of the space in which a listener is located” (Clarke 2013, 94). When the female sermon preacher (*zakira*) speaks in *majlis*, the position of the seat of the sermon preacher, from where the sound emanates, is fixed; and the logic of the architecture impacts her sounding which entails the use of the microphone if needed. But the sonic gestures and circulation are not always based on the visibility of the spatial arrangement. The listener-participant of *majlis* reading starts by looking intently at the preacher and following her gesticulations, visual and sonic. But, as the affective climax is anticipated, no one requires visual cues, rather closed eyes and a lowered head signal a more attentive listening to engage with the “pure” sound emanating from the speaker’s mouth. The whole effort is geared towards the de-spatialization of sound (Eisenberg 2015) to make direct and unmediated connection with the transcendental value of sonic piety.

Shi’i mourning, in its ecstasy of pain, brings out sound from the textuality of the sermon and *nawha*, positing it as de-spatialized and pure. The transcendental values of sound are affirmed through the mediation of the sonic gestures of women reciting the *nawha*, the sound of rhythmic chest-beating along with recitation/chanting, and the voice of the preacher, her accents heightening speech beyond everyday materiality.

A listening of Shi’i sonic attributes

Shi’i sonic attributes can offer an epistemological shift from the traditional elements that constitute private-public dimensions of religious experiences. Scholars have discussed various Muslim sounding practices, especially the *adhaan* and public sermons in multi-aural heterogeneous urban space, but their focus has remained solely on Sunni practices (Hirschkind 2006; El Guindi 2008; Eisenberg 2013). A study of Shi’i private sounds can be a corrective to the “deafness” of academia towards the “unheard” sounds of Shi’i private mourning which does not have the same “territorializing force” that the public sounding of Islam possesses (Eisenberg 2015, 200).

The Shi'i experience can neither be identified solely as Muslim experience, nor exhausted or subsumed in the logic of mosque-based sonic experiences of the majoritarian sounding practices of the Sunnis. In this context, the place-making (Desplat 2012) and sounding practices that are part of Shi'i ritualistic performances can open up theoretical possibilities to understand Shi'i identity-formations in the urban post-coloniality of Kolkata. I study how the Shi'as in diverse regional and historical ways "imagine, experience and inhabit" (Desplat 2012, 10) the sacred space to endow it with the value of a sacred sound. This approach calls for a multilayered understanding of the socioeconomic dimensions of the city space as marked with the religious identity of multiple communities.

The battle of Karbala marks the first sectarian schism in Islam, dividing the *ummah* of the Prophet into two sects—the Sunnis and the Shi'as. Shi'i intercessory piety for Imamate has triggered the protracted spiritual and political rivalry between the sects. The sensory auditory-physical forms of mourning in Muharram are considered the threatening alternatives to the Sunni interpretation of prophetic inheritance and the ecstasy of mourning is not sanctioned by the Sunni scriptures in general, because of its sensory modes of embodying intercessory piety. An attempt to read the Shi'i sonic as such offers an alternative framework to the Sunni validation of sound. In the Sunni worldview, the pure sound of Qur'an recitations connects the ephemeral with the ethereal for which Prophet Muhammad's ideal sounding/praying and Muhammad as the "beautiful model" (Surah 33, 21) should be emulated (Schimmel 1985, 16–48; Faizer 2011). The emblematic sounding practice of the Shi'as is based not on the reading of the Qur'an, but on the recitation of elegies and lamenting chants. Shi'i acoustemology relies upon an affective structure of pure pain as the core of mediation with the transcendental which is achieved through the preparation of the body—including voice—as the pure medium to witness that pain. And in the process, the materiality of the auditory experience, the orchestrated body, the voice, the textuality of the sermons and elegies, and the technologies to produce sound are invested with the agency of mediation to create a "transcendental plane of meaning" (Van de Port 2011, 163).

The privacy of male Shi'i acoustemology: New media and mediation

The quality and features of sound and performance took on new shapes with the advent of new media technologies, internet, and social media practices (Hirschkind 2006; Campbell 2005; 2010; 2012). New authors (elegy writers and

performers/*nawhkhans*) emerged in the Indian vernacular Shi'i landscape by emulating transnational sounding practices (mainly the new media practices in Pakistan) to forge a new transnational communitarian sense by placing the private acoustemological field in a transnational network. The most productive mediations of new sounding practices can be discerned in the use of CDs, DVDs, and social media.

The CDs and DVDs produced in Pakistan and imported to different Shi'a quarters in northern and eastern India brought in sweeping changes in the private and public listening schedules, patterns of listening-viewing and affective-textual response to these digital artifacts.² As a response to the transnational flow of digital *nawha*, new sounding cultures evolved as audiovisual recordings of the *nawhas* performed by the local *nawhakhans* started to be produced and distributed in the local digital networks in the first decade of this century. These local responses to the transnational digital devotional network significantly changed the textuality and sonic practices, as well as the orchestration of the body and tonality of the local Shi'i landscape. The studio of the videographer emerged as the new arena of mourning where the *nawha* was now read and recorded. The *nawhas* became ringtones and caller tunes and appeared on individual playlists that could be accessed outside the specific mourning time.

Through social media, the male *majlis* of mourning inside the *imambaras*, which used to follow the rigid norms of privacy, started to reformulate themselves in the matrix of the transterritorial online sound affect. That response created a virtual public sphere through the recordings of private rituals being posted on social media. Social media users, mostly men, especially through their Facebook accounts, became part of a virtual network where they established their Shi'i identity through their religious participation online. The whole new set of experiences changed the perception of sound and (offline) sounding practices in the interiority of the *imambaras* that had been designated for men.

From my ethnographic study across different Shi'i quarters of Kolkata since 2010, I could see that to date neither individual Shi'i women nor the women's quarters in Kolkata in general have become public actors in digital religion.

Even as the CD/DVD culture made a quick and silent disappearance with the proliferation of the internet, cheap data packs and smartphones in the mid-2010s, women did not become the protagonists of online sonic experiences and productions immediately. Women's responsiveness has continued exclusively offline where any kind of recordings, following the

2 For more details, see Halder (2016).

traditional template of gendered privacy of religion, is not encouraged. Here, inaccessibility of cell phones or internet connections in general is not the cause for such disinterest from women. The invisibility is not a fallout of any absolute exclusionary mechanism of the community; in effect, Shi'i women are quite visible in other social spaces across class tiers and actively contribute to the economic growth of the family. Such gender segregation of recording or digitization can be said to be needed to secure the gendered privacy of religion as it were. When new media captured the imagination regarding new religious forms in the male private sector, the women's quarters were kept secure without any digital interference so as to uphold traditional forms. Needless to say, there was no such formal notification on this and the new public-private orientation took shape along the changing forms of male rituals and their online presence.

But the absence of female actors on digital and online religious platforms does not confirm a monolithic spatial and experiential sonic privacy of women's *majlises*; rather, women's sonic practices unfold and multiply through their connections with external social forces. I introduce here the sonic actions performed by three *zakiras* at three *imambaras* and explore the affective dimension of their sonic phenomena. These women do not have direct online presence. However, the patterns of their elocution and sonic rhetoric clearly show the influence of the online performances of male preachers. Even if women are rarely active online, their varied access to online resources recalibrates their sound gestures. Thus, *majlises* attest to the dynamic processes of the women's sonic-religious subject formation, individually and collectively, even if they are not public agents of religious change and sonic ritual in the virtual realm.

The private dimensions of Shi'i commemorative ritual

Majlis sessions inside the *imambaras* follow a certain structure. The *zakira* induces the pain of the unjust deaths of Imam Husayn and his companions by narrating episodes from the battle of Karbala with the commentary endowing the narration with interpretive values. Once this affective speech reaches a dramatic emotional climax it culminates in the audiences' response—*matam* or rhythmic chants of elegies and chest-beating to transform the body into a medium and witness of the pain of Imam Husayn and the other martyrs.

Between 2016 and 2019, I attended the *majlis* sessions presided by three *zakiras*, Hashmat Fatima, Rana Meerza and Nuzhat Zahra, at three



Figure 4.1 Preaching by the *zakira* Hashmat Fatima and attentive listening at Haji Lane imambara, 2018. (Photo by the author)

imambaras—Haji Lane Imambara (Haji Lane), Mehfil e-Haidari (Metcalf Lane), and House Imambara (11, Pemantle Street) in central Kolkata. These imambaras sustain a cultural tradition of women's *majlises* initiated by the preaching of a *zakira*. House Imambara hosts the descendants of Shi'i Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, the last independent ruler of Shi'i Awadh in North India, who was exiled to the southern fringes of Calcutta when his kingdom Lucknow was felled and his state annexed by the East India Company in 1856. With the Nawab came the Awadhi tradition of public mourning practices and a culture of private imambaras at the royal households continued.

Preaching sessions become participatory communicative practices as the listeners engage in the sonic expressions of the *zakira*. Audition that is the sensory modality of sound entails here not only listening, but the perception of their felt-body (Steingo & Sykes 2019, 17). As the act of listening engulfs their responsive bodies, listening, as a set of habitual bodily techniques, induces bodily responses that may stem from the domain of linguistic signification that is the rhetorical narrative on the battle of Karbala, but also embodies an affect not fully exhausted into language (Eisenlohr 2018). It is a two-way communication, and not a one-way impact of the oration of the battle sequences to create the perception of the felt-body. Rather, the particular volitional responsiveness of the listener deepens the capacity of an individual to hear in this particular manner (Hirschkind 2001, 24) and



Figure 4.2 *Nawha*-reading by the listeners after the preaching session at Haji Lane imambara, 2018. (Photo by the author)

to finally engage in a particular set of sounding, both through the body and the voice, as sermons are delivered and a *nawha* is recited.

Even the fully autonomous private mourning of women soundings within the imambaras cannot be reduced to their essential psychosomatic interiority. Rather, contingent links between the specific forms of ethical life as such lament gatherings, the individual and collective memory of listening, and public discourses on identity of the Shi'as as a double minority community need to be mapped and scrutinized to engage with these sonic practices.

In the male *majlises*, the practitioners are seen to have restructured the ritual patterns and aligned Shi'i regional identity along transnational lines by responding to the flow of digital artifacts and social media posts. Male preaching sessions have increased in number at the imambaras with preachers from Lucknow, the North Indian center for Shi'i religiosity, with their perfect Urdu and a specific transnational style of sounding, coming in to endow the regional religious network with standardized versions. At the same time, social media activities have enhanced the capacity of listening of the Shi'i men by exposing them to an eclectic collection of preaching and *nawha*-reading in Iran, Pakistan, and elsewhere. It can be said that such exposure to the transnational Shi'i experiences necessitated more structured offline lament rituals redefining the performative sonic attributes of the community. Though women, except for a scanty few, are yet to explore the ever-expanding cyberspace, they listen to the sermons being performed in

the imambaras or online by the prolific *zakiras*. Until the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the new media experience, by bringing audiovisual validation of a transterritorial belongingness to the community so far living in physical cloisters of a double minority, had reinvigorated the community's interest in religious activities such as gathering at the imambaras, listening to the sermons and endowing the space with specific values. Ripples of enthusiasm touched the lives of young men as well. They could enact their transterritorial Shi'i identity through their social media activities or simply visit the imambaras.

All three *zakiras*, Hashmat Fatima, Rana Meerza, and Nuzhat Zahra, coming from three different generations, have developed their own styles of delivery over the years by listening to the male preaching sessions and the occasional female preachers visiting Kolkata from Lucknow and other places in Uttar Pradesh, a populous North Indian state. Rana Meerza, now in her mid-40s, originally from Murshidabad district in West Bengal, began preaching when she was still in high school by reading from printed books of sermons in Urdu. Later she improvised her own style by listening to a specific *zakira* named Sayed Rizvi who migrated from Uttar Pradesh to settle as a school teacher in Murshidabad. On a visit to Kolkata, Rana Meerza was invited to read a sermon at another House Imambara, at 12, Pemantle Street, and soon after that she was invited to deliver the sermons during the ritual days of Muharram at Mehfil e-Haidari, an exclusive space for women's mourning sessions.

Hashmat Fatima, a woman in her early 60s, the most sought-after *zakira* at the two House Imambaras on Pemantle Street and one public imambara at Haji Lane, meant exclusively for women, shares the similar sonic network of listening, a translocal flow of sonic gestures from North India emulated by the local male sonic actors.

At Haji Lane imambara, a small one-story house on the land donated by a pious lady of the locality, Hashmat Fatima was the sole *zakira* for a long time. When she fell ill in 2018, two consecutive years went without the usual elaborate sermon session at Haji Lane imambara. But at 11, Pemantle Street, the daughter-in-law of the house, Nuzhat Zahra, who had started leading the reading sessions (about the glory of Imam Husayn, different from sermons) after her marriage, gradually took up the position of the *zakira*. She was even invited as the sermon reader at the *majlis* of Hashmat Fatima's house when the latter was too ailing to do the honors. Hashmat Fatima resumed her sermon at Haji Lane imambara in 2019 after getting better, but at 11, Pemantle Street, she stopped her oratory sessions as most sermons were now led by Nuzhat, now in her late 30s.

These three women stylize and creatively improvise the acoustic materiality needed to articulate pain. Aesthetic sensations of the audience depend on how the *zakiras* present their sermons through voice modulations, changing tempos of narration, silence, vocal dynamism, intonation, pitch, and accent.

Nuzhat started reading the praise lyrics about Imam Husayn where she did not invest in dramatic modulation. Her voice never left the flat note. Compared to Hashmat's melodious and sonorous voice, Nuzhat did not sound musical. But irrespective of the different sonic attributes of these two women, a comparative reading of Nuzhat's own speech patterns from 2014 to 2019 reveals the processes of her own sonic capacity building and empowerment as a sonic religious subject. She has grown from a young daughter-in-law in jeans and headscarf organizing the ritual paraphernalia at the *sanctum sanctorum* when I first met her in 2012 to a pious sermon preacher in black *burqa*, leading and channeling the affect of mourning. She became a sonic agent and ideal mediator of the transcendental sound. Now, all three women make their discursive speeches based on a basic template of vocality to induce pain in a call-response manner integral to the *majlis*. But their soundings expose different memories of listening and separate socialities of pain, making any autonomous pre-discursive value of the voice impossible.

Hashmat's sonic experience of the older-generation male *zakirs* provides her a template. However, she also uses dialogue with the audience. The feminine persuasive capacity inherent in her voice and discourse has carved out an intimate interiority of speech where the audience is notionally included as the narrative co-creator. Through the dialogic persuasive segment when the audience is ready to respond to the final climax, Hashmat's voice touches the upper octave and breaks into assonances at the end of chosen words, taking sound, through melodious reverberations, to a flight beyond its literary ambit.



Audio sample 4.1

Zakira Hashmat Fatima. Haji Lane Imbarara, 2013. Source: recording by the author.

But, if one studies the speech of both Rana and Nuzhat, while it is the matter of responsiveness from the audience that makes sermons possible as a speech act, a dialogicity with the audience is absent in the level of the

literary speech and persuasion takes up a more direct and compellingly instructive shape. When Rana's speech attains its climax, her voice breaks at every alternate syllable, choosing upper octave notes and touching very subtly and quickly the middle and lower octave notes. She uses the sound of her own breathing in a sonic prowess and thumps her right knee with her right palm at climactic moments. In the dramatic and hypnotic production of pain where the audience can only surrender through their attentive listening, Rana's sonic gestures are clearly inspired by those used by the male *zakirs*. Rana even uses the denominator used in the male quarters—*O azizo*—‘oh my friends’, an address never used to signify female friends.



Audio sample 4.2

Zakira Rana Meerza. Mehfil e-Haidari, 2019. Source: recording by the author.

Nuzhat tells me that there are many sonic references one can readily consult, especially on YouTube, which was not the case for Hashmat who belongs to the previous generation and read a lot before creating her own sonic discourse and style, as Nuzhat informed me admiringly. The style and discourse of Hashmat and Rana were created before the advent of social media, but Hashmat does not seem much affected by the sonic gestures of the male *zakirs* which Rana emulates. Nuzhat confesses that though she does not get much free time after teaching Urdu at a college and attending to her children and in-laws at home, she prepares her discourses like a “seminar paper”, focusing especially on young women as her implied audience to make them realize the ethics of Islam (she did not refer to Shi’ism here), which they might not get at home. Nuzhat’s speech, like Rana’s, uses forceful assonance at the end of words, equivalent to the thrust that men exude while beating their chests during mourning sessions, causing her to lose the natural timbre of her voice.



Audio sample 4.3

Zakira Nuzhat Zahra, in 2014. 11, Pemantle Street. Source: recording by the author.



Audio sample 4.4

Nuzhat Zahra, in 2019. 11, Pemantle Street. Source: recording by the author.

The affirmation of the quality and features of pure sound makes it evident that the emergence of this new actor, Nuzhat, was not because of the essential sonorous quality of her voice or her persuasive enunciation alone. For Nuzhat, her marriage to the direct descendent of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah has made her the ideal candidate to carry on the family legacy. At the same time, along with that marital connection, a degree in Urdu and a teaching job at a college have turned her into an eligible sound actor in the new acoustemological environment. In this new transnational network the local might feel a need for a female role model of piety for the young women of the Shi'i community and Nuzhat readily satisfies the criterion. Nuzhat is among the few Shi'i women with a Facebook account. Though women's *majlises* have so far not been structurally affected by the online and physical ritual practices of men, and Nuzhat's Facebook activity is limited to sharing and liking only her husband's posts, she becomes a mediator between transterritorial and local sets of sonic practices and the regional need felt in the gendered domain.

Conclusion

Shi'i auditory practices invite a set of different analytical and affective contexts to discuss how the felt-body of mourning registers sound by the "commingling" (Eisenlohr 2019) with the sonic phenomena. I placed the sonic phenomena outside the pure phenomenological dimensions within a context where several personal and collective reasons and memories condition the sonic gestures of the Shi'i *zakiras*. My methodology has contextualized the individual sonic memories, attributes, and gestures of the *zakiras* to place these exclusively private female mourning rituals beyond the binary of public and private religious acoustemology, embedding them in the unequal power structures of the post-colonial cityscape.

It should be noted that, though Shi'i women did not become active sonic contributors in the making of religious sounds online, the younger generation does not shy from getting references from the online reservoir of *nawhas*



Figure 4.3 Haji Lane Imambara, 2019. (Photo by the author)

and consulting them. Girls in high school and colleges who own cell phones freely receive and forward *nawha* videos on WhatsApp. As these girls do not have public social media accounts to date where they are engaged as part of an online network, such private acts of sharing on WhatsApp do not unsettle the interiority of religious activity. At the same time such exchanges make them potential agents in the circulation of these new digital artifacts. At Haji Lane Imambara, the ailing Hashmat's absence has created a major affective and functional vacuum, but the women of the Imambara have not yet found a permanent replacement for Hashmat's sermons. Before the onset of the pandemic, till the last Muharram in 2019, it was unclear whether Nuzhat would read the sermon in a larger community network because of her family affiliation. But during the *nawha* reading session in 2019, a teenage schoolgirl (in tenth standard) was asked to come forward in Haji Lane Imambara, marking a moment of generational change in an interior space where only seniors had so far led the reading of the *nawha*. "A good voice she has," I heard an elderly lady murmur at the gathering. The girl took out a cell phone from her sling bag and switched on her mobile data to read out a *nawha* whose lyrics were available online. Her choice of new *nawhas* in a place where always traditional *nawhas* are read from old handwritten copies torn at the edges with decades of regular tactility transforms the private sonic space into a possible domain of new actors with their new deliberations. Once this happens, new kinds of listening will need to be deployed to understand such deliberations as instances of gendered empowerment and subject formation within Shi'i religiosity and sonic citizenship.

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