Creating Identity through Piety: The Culture of Niaz in Rawalpindi (1947–2019)

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Abstract

This research proposes that *Niaz*, a traditional term for votive food offerings, is a central and defining cultural-religious marker for Shia Muslims, particularly in the socio-political context of Rawalpindi, Pakistan. This practice is not merely a charitable act but a complex social ritual that builds and reinforces both personal and communal piety. It functions as a tangible embodiment of Shia religiosity, history, and collective identity. This essay investigates the historical evolution of Niaz culture within Rawalpindi over a 72-year period, from the formative moment of Partition in 1947 to the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. The study is methodologically grounded in qualitative analysis, primarily drawing upon oral histories and surveys conducted with members of the Shia community in Rawalpindi. I frame these findings within the theoretical lens of Émile Durkheim's work on social rituals, which posits that such collective rites are essential for transforming shared knowledge into profound, lived belief. Rawalpindi serves as a critical case study due to its unique history of post-partition migration and its subsequent role as an epicentre of sectarian tensions. My analysis demonstrates that Niaz is a resilient and adaptive practice. It has sustained the Shia community through periods of political instability, asserted a distinct identity in the face of militant sectarianism and associated taboos, and adapted its logistical forms to navigate state securitisation and public health mandates, all while preserving its core spiritual function.

Keywords: Niaz, Food and Religion, Shia Community, Rawalpindi, Shia Piety

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In the study of human societies, food is never solely about sustenance. It is a powerful symbol, a marker of identity, and a language through which communities articulate their beliefs and social boundaries. For religious groups, and especially for minority communities, dietary practices and food-based rituals become critical arenas for identity preservation and cultural transmission (Husseini de Araújo et al. 2021). Within the diverse tapestry of Islam, food practices serve to delineate not only the sacred from the profane but also one community of interpretation from another. This research focuses on one of the most significant of these practices within South Asian Shiism: the culture of *Niaz*, or the preparation and distribution of votive food.

Niaz functions as a critical pillar of Shia Muslim identity, religiosity, and communal piety in Pakistan. It is a social ritual that translates theological tenets and historical narratives into a tangible, sensory, and shared experience. This essay investigates the evolution of this culture in the strategic and symbolically charged city of Rawalpindi, tracing its development over seven decades from the creation of Pakistan in 1947 to the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. I argue that Niaz is far more than a simple tradition; it is a primary mechanism through which Shia belief is embodied, performed, and sustained. This ritual is a form of "lived religion" that provides a more accurate understanding of community identity than a study of theological texts alone.

The post-partition environment of Pakistan presented a complex and often contradictory landscape for its Shia population. While a large and influential minority, Shias immediately faced the challenge of articulating their identity within a new state where the dominant religious narrative was increasingly defined by a Sunni majority (Rieck 2001, 268–70). From the earliest days, Shia leaders like Amir Haydar Khan of Mahmudabad expressed concerns to Muhammad Ali Jinnah himself over the freedom to perform their distinct rituals, fearing they would be subsumed or suppressed in the new nation (Rieck 2016, 36–40). These fears were not unfounded. The subsequent decades saw the rise of a state-sponsored, monolithic interpretation of Islam, creating an environment of contested religious space.

In this context, the preservation and performance of communal rites like Niaz became a potent act of identity affirmation. The act of cooking, sharing, and consuming food in the name of the *Ahl-e-Bayt* (the Prophet's family) became a public and domestic declaration of a distinct Shia worldview. Analysing the history, practice, and social perceptions of Niaz provides a unique and intimate lens through which to understand Shia resilience, community-building, and the tangible expression of faith. This study moves beyond the typical scholarly focus on the mourning rituals of Muharram to explore the year-round, piety-building function of Niaz, arguing that it is this consistent, quotidian practice that truly forms the bedrock of communal identity.

The scholarly field connecting food and religion is well-established, confirming that culinary cultures often represent a "web of significance" (Geertz 1973, 5) that structures daily life, social relations, and collective identity. For Muslims, the Quranic concept of *tayyibat*, or all things good and pure, places food at the centre of a divinely mandated lifestyle, serving as a constant reminder of divine providence and moral obligation

(Tayob 2016, 67–69). Scholars have long noted that specific dietary choices and food-related practices are deeply entwined with religious identity, acting as a form of social boundary-making (Shatenstein and Ghadirian 1998, 223). This general principle gains sharper focus when examining the distinctions *within* Islam. The sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia communities, while rooted in theological and political history, is also performed and reinforced through distinct ritual practices, including food.

While Niaz shares functional parallels with other South Asian traditions of sacred food distribution, I argue that these comparisons can be misleading if not theologically contextualised. The Sikh tradition of *langar*, for example, is a radical expression of social equality, designed to break down caste and class barriers by having all sit and eat together (Mooney 2023, 135–37). The Hindu concept of *prasadi* (Venkataraman, n.d.) involves food that has been sanctified by being offered to a deity. Niaz, while embodying charity and creating communal equality, is theologically distinct. It is primarily an act of *remembrance* and *emulation*. It is rooted in a specific devotion to the *Ahl-e-Bayt* and a re-enactment of their foundational stories of generosity and sacrifice. This distinction—moving from a general act of charity to a specific performance of "Alid loyalism"—is central to my argument and differentiates Niaz from other Muslim charitable acts like *sadaqa* (voluntary charity).

Despite the centrality of Niaz to Shia life, dedicated scholarly analysis remains surprisingly thin. Ethnographic studies of Muharram rituals, for example, frequently mention Niaz and *Sabeels* (water stalls) as integral components of the commemorative landscape (Khan et al. 2014, 123; Abou Zahab 2008, 104). Other works have discussed the general history of charitable food distribution in South Asia, often connecting it to Sufi shrine culture (Baig 2021). However, a long-term study focused on Niaz itself as a builder of *piety* and a specific marker of Shia identity, particularly outside the month of Muharram, is a significant gap in the literature. Furthermore, while primary religious texts (such as Thanvi, n.d.) and countless online forums allude to the sectarian debates on the permissibility of Niaz, few academic works have systematically investigated the nature of the *taboos* associated with the practice, or analysed its modern adaptations in response to pressing contemporary issues like state securitisation and global pandemics. This essay, therefore, aims to fill this gap by providing a focused, qualitative, and historical analysis of Niaz in a key Pakistani city.

To adequately answer the research question—*how* Niaz builds and sustains piety—a qualitative research methodology was essential. This approach is uniquely suited for exploring the subjective meanings, deep-seated perceptions, and shared beliefs that a community attaches to a central cultural phenomenon. Understanding Niaz requires moving beyond textual theology to grasp what scholars call "lived religion"—the way faith is practised, felt, and embodied in the course of daily life. The primary data for this research was therefore gathered through extensive oral history work, specifically semi-structured and structured interviews with members of the Shia community residing in Rawalpindi. I focused my data collection on areas with significant Shia populations, such as Chakri, Satellite

Town, Adyala Road, Banni, and the area surrounding the Shah Chan Chirag shrine, to capture a representative cross-section of experiences across different socio-economic and demographic groups.

To supplement this deep, qualitative data, I conducted two wide-ranging surveys. These surveys were designed to gather a broader spectrum of perspectives on the practice and, crucially, its perception from members of various Muslim sects. This mixed-method approach allowed me to triangulate my findings: the interviews provided the deep, narrative "why" behind the practice, while the surveys offered a wider, quantitative context of its social reception, including the prevalence of the very taboos that my research seeks to understand. This essay is thus grounded in the voices and lived experiences of the community itself, fulfilling the ethical and academic imperative to centre the subjects of the research.

I analyse this rich qualitative data through the theoretical lens of Émile Durkheim's (1912) foundational work on social ritual. I propose that Niaz functions as a classic "collective effervescent" ritual—a communal act that brings individuals together, generates a shared emotional intensity, and reaffirms their collective narrative. In Durkheim's model, such rituals are essential for transforming abstract theological knowledge (the stories of Karbala or Surah-e-Dahr) into a powerful, shared, and *felt* belief. This shared feeling strengthens the "collective conscience," or the set of shared beliefs and moral attitudes, that bind the community together. Niaz, in this framework, is the physical mechanism by which the Shia community of Rawalpindi annually and monthly re-charges its spiritual and social batteries, reinforcing its solidarity and distinct identity.

This theoretical framework is supported by rigorous historical contextualisation, drawing on primary sources such as religious texts (both Shia and Sunni) and archival records concerning the Rawalpindi district. This is combined with secondary scholarly sources on Shia history, Pakistani politics, and sectarian relations. As detailed in the original thesis appendix, my transcription method for the interviews was thematic, focusing on preserving the precise meaning and context of the participants' responses while editing for clarity and conciseness. This ensures that the analysis remains firmly tethered to the empirical data gathered from the field.

The Post-Partition Establishment of Niaz Culture (1947–1970s)

The culture of Niaz in Rawalpindi was not a new phenomenon in 1947 but was instead a pre-existing tradition that took on a powerful new role as a tool for community-building and identity-anchoring in the turbulent post-partition era. The term *Niaz* itself, from Persian, simply means "offering" or "votive." However, in the specific context of South Asian Shiism, it refers to the religiously mandated preparation and distribution of food on sacred occasions. This practice is most visibly associated with the mournful months of Muharram and Safar, where food is distributed after a *Majlis* (religious gathering) in the name of Imam Hussain and the martyrs of Karbala (Khan et al. 2014, 123). Yet, Niaz is not limited to mourning. It is a year-round practice, marking celebratory events such as Eid-e-Ghadeer (the Prophet's declaration at Ghadir Khumm), Eid-e-Mubahila, the birth anniversaries of the Imams, and the widely

observed *Koonday* Niaz on 22 Rajab in honour of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq. This constant, ritualised sharing of food creates a rhythm for communal life, a calendar of shared piety.

My informants trace the conceptual origins of this practice to the very beginning of the Islamic message. Several participants identified the *Dawat-e-Zul Ashira* (Feast of the Clans) as the archetypal Niaz. At this event, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) famously gathered his relatives over a shared meal to deliver his divine message, thereby establishing a precedent for using food as a vehicle for a sacred invitation (Aale Yaseen 2019). This act of feeding was later sanctified in its mournful aspect by the tragedy of Karbala, where Imam Hussain and his companions were martyred while suffering from intense thirst and hunger (al-Tabari 2015). I propose that Niaz thus became a symbolic act of remembrance, a way to quench the thirst and hunger of the *Ahl-e-Bayt* (the Prophet's family) vicariously by feeding the community in their name. This dual character—both celebratory and commemorative—makes Niaz a uniquely flexible and pervasive ritual that weaves itself into the fabric of daily life.

The 1947 partition was a moment of profound demographic and social rupture for Rawalpindi. The city, which had a significant Hindu and Sikh population, saw a massive influx of Muslim refugees from India and an exodus of its non-Muslim communities (Poddar 2023). This demographic shift was documented in the 1941 census, which showed Muslims at 80 per cent, but the post-partition reality solidified this majority. Critically, as noted by historians, the pre-partition tradition of offering food and water (*Sabeels*) during Muharram was a syncretic one, with Hindus and Sikhs actively participating alongside Muslims (Rieck 2016). This cross-communal participation in the grief of Karbala was a hallmark of a shared *Hindustani* culture. After 1947, with the departure of these communities, this practice became an almost exclusively Muslim, and increasingly Shia-led, ritual. For the thousands of displaced and unsettled Shia migrants arriving in Rawalpindi, the familiar ritual of Niaz became an immediate and essential tool for survival and community-building.

This community-building impulse was visible from the very first Ashura observed in the new nation in December 1947. In those early, chaotic months, the distribution of Niaz was an act of profound communal solidarity, with both Sunnis and Shias participating to feed the streams of displaced individuals, transcending sectarian lines in a moment of shared crisis. As Shia refugees settled, they naturally gravitated towards areas where a Shia presence or infrastructure already existed. This process was not haphazard; it was anchored by key institutions. The 300-year-old shrine of Shah Chan Chirag in Raja Bazaar, for example, was already a major centre for religious activity, drawing disciples (*Murideen*) from all sects for its *Urs* (anniversary commemoration), which prominently featured Qawali, *Dhamal* (devotional dance), and the large-scale distribution of Niaz (Malik 2019). This pre-existing sacred geography provided an immediate anchor for new arrivals, a place of spiritual and social familiarity in a world turned upside down.

Simultaneously, the Shia community began to build new infrastructure, formalising their presence. *Imambargahs* (congregation halls) like Qasir-e-Shabbir in

Satellite Town and Imambargah Hifazat Ali Shah in Raja Bazaar were established in the early 1950s. I suggest that these were not just places of worship; they were critical social centres that served as the new heart of the refugee community. They organised Majalis, provided community support, mediated disputes, and, most importantly, acted as focal points for the regular and reliable distribution of Niaz. This institutionalisation of the practice was further bolstered by the migration of influential Shia *Ulama* (scholars) and political leaders to Pakistan. Figures like Muzaffar Ali Khan Qizalbash, who led the All Pakistan Shia Conference (APSC) from Lahore, and the respected cleric Mufti Jaffar Hussain, who settled in the region, provided spiritual and political reassurance (Rieck 2016, 36–51). Their leadership lent legitimacy and organisational strength to the community, encouraging the open and proud expression of Shia rituals. Under this protective canopy, Niaz was embedded not just as a household custom but as a public, confident, and central fact of Shia life in Rawalpindi.

Niaz as a Central Practice of Piety (1970s–2000s)

Niaz is not merely a social tradition but is, in fact, a primary vehicle for the cultivation and expression of Shia piety. This specific form of piety is deeply rooted in what scholars call "Alid loyalism"—a profound, narrative-driven, and emotional devotion to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his family, the *Ahl-e-Bayt* (Schubel 1993; Hyder 2006). While this devotion is most famously expressed through rituals of mourning (*matam*) for the tragedy of Karbala, Shia piety is not solely defined by grief. It also encompasses joy in the *Ahl-e-Bayt's* celebrations and, most importantly, the active emulation of their virtues, especially their generosity and self-sacrifice. Niaz, therefore, is a direct act of this emulation. It is an attempt to live the virtues of the Imams, to make their history a present-day reality.

My interviews with members of the Rawalpindi Shia community repeatedly and powerfully confirmed this direct link between Niaz and the nourishment of the soul. As one of my informants, Sidra, eloquently explained, "The nourishment of the body is food, while the nourishment of the soul is feeding others" (interview, 2024). She, like many others, attributed this wisdom to Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib. This perspective fundamentally reframes Niaz: it is not simple charity, which flows one way (from the wealthy to the poor), but a spiritual necessity for the giver. The act of giving becomes a prerequisite for one's own spiritual well-being and purification. This concept aligns with the broader Islamic understanding of piety (*taqwa*) as a state of God-consciousness that manifests in righteous conduct, but it gives it a specifically Shia flavour—piety is achieved *through* the love and emulation of the Imams.

This practice is, for my informants, theologically anchored in the Quran itself. Participants in my research frequently cited verses from Surah-e-Dahr (or Surah al-Insan) as the ultimate validation for Niaz: "And they feed, for the love of Allah, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive, saying , 'We feed you only for the countenance of Allah. We wish not from you reward or gratitude'" (Quran 76:8-9). In Shia exegesis, as my interviewee Sidra elaborated, the "they" in this verse is understood to refer directly to the *Ahl-e-Bayt* (Imam Ali, Lady Fatima, and

their sons) who, according to tradition, gave away their own food for three consecutive days while fasting. Thus, when a Shia family prepares Niaz, they are not just performing a general act of charity; they are consciously re-enacting a specific, foundational story of piety, positioning themselves in the spiritual lineage of the Imams. This makes the Niaz a powerful act of devotional remembrance.

The very *process* of preparing Niaz is, therefore, an act of ritual piety. It is not a mundane culinary task; it is a sacred undertaking. As Shabab Zahra, an interviewee from Adyala Road, described in detail: "Before starting to prepare Niaz I do *wudu* (ablution) and proceed with the name of Allah. I also recite *duas* (prayers) that are specific to that event, like the *Dua-e-Dastarkhwan*. When all this is done the food itself becomes not just a source of nourishment but blessing (*Barkat*) and cleanses the soul" (interview, 2024). This testimony underscores the importance of ritual purity (*tahara*) and intention (*niyyah*) in sanctifying the offering. This aligns with classical Shia jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which holds that the state of the preparer and their sincere intention are essential for the offering to be accepted (Majlisi 1984). The food is transformed from mere sustenance into a sacred conduit of divine blessing, imbued with the spiritual power of the names it was cooked under.

This profound individual piety is then immediately extended to the communal level. Niaz is the binding agent that creates and reaffirms the community. As another participant, Syeda Farwa Kazmi, described it, "Niaz is a binding factor in creating harmony and sense of community among Shias. It brings us together as all the people sit together on one *Dastarkhwan* (a communal eating mat) to share food and eat under the commonality of belonging to the same sect" (interview, 2024). The ritual of sitting shoulder-to-shoulder on the floor, sharing the same sanctified food given in the name of the Imams, transcends social and economic barriers. It is a moment of profound equality and shared identity. In this act, I argue, we see Durkheim's theory of ritual in perfect motion. The abstract, individual belief in the *Ahl-e-Bayt* is transformed into a tangible, collective, and effervescent experience. The community physically ingests its shared beliefs, reinforcing its social solidarity and collective conscience.

This reinforcement of a distinct Shia piety became intensely politicised during the 1980s. The military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) embarked on a state-level "Islamization" programme that was explicitly based on a specific Sunni-Hanafi interpretation of *Shariah* (Rieck 2016). This was not a neutral religious project; it was a direct legal and theological challenge to Shia practices and jurisprudence. The imposition of a state-collected *Zakat* (alms) based on Sunni *fiqh*, for example, was seen as a direct infringement on the Shia religious duty to pay *khums* (a religious tithe) to their own *marja* (religious authorities). This was perceived not just as a financial matter, but as an attempt to sever the link between the community and its clerical leadership.

This state-led pressure triggered a massive and unprecedented Shia mobilisation. The 1980 "Siege of Islamabad," led by the widely respected cleric Mufti Ja'far Husain, saw tens of thousands of Shias blockade the federal secretariat, effectively shutting down the capital. They demanded exemption from the *Zakat* ordinance,

asserting their right to follow their own *Fiqh-e-Jafariya*. The state, stunned by the scale of the protest, was forced to concede. This event marked the birth of the Tehrik-i Nifaz-i Fiqh-i Ja'fariya (TNFJ), the first mass-mobilisation Shia political-religious organisation in Pakistan. In this hyper-charged and confrontational environment, I argue that public rituals like Niaz took on a new and defiant meaning. Preparing Niaz during Muharram or celebrating *Koonday* was no longer just an act of piety; it became a public and political declaration of a distinct Shia identity that refused to be subsumed into the state's monolithic version of Islam.

The state's actions, and the corresponding Shia assertiveness, tragically uncorked the genie of militant sectarianism. This period saw the formation of virulently anti-Shia organisations like Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) in 1985 (Rafiq 2014). The SSP and its affiliates made the public targeting of Shia identity their central mission, agitating to have Shias declared a non-Muslim minority. Their inflammatory rhetoric, distributed via pamphlets and mosque sermons, specifically attacked core Shia rituals—including self-flagellation (*matam*), processions, and Niaz—as heretical, polytheistic (*shirk*), and insulting to the companions of the Prophet (PBUH). This set the stage for a decades-long conflict where the performance of piety itself, including the simple act of sharing food, became an act of bravery and defiance.

Evolution, Taboos, and Resilient Identity (1990s–2019)

During the sacred month of Muharram, a level of syncretism often persisted. Many Sunnis continued to participate in distributing Niaz and drinking from *Sabeels*, reflecting a shared, cross-sectarian cultural reverence for Imam Hussain and the tragedy of Karbala (Abou Zahab 2008, 104–6). This shared grief often (though not always) transcended the hard sectarian lines. However, for other Niaz occasions that were more exclusively Shia—most notably the *Koonday* Niaz on 22 Rajab—the sectarian boundaries hardened significantly. It was here, I found, that the anti-Shia taboos became most potent and socially damaging.

The most common taboo, propagated by hardline Sunni clerics, is that consuming Shia Niaz is *haram* (religiously forbidden). The theological argument, as found in pamphlets and online forums (e.g., "Words of Qur'an" 2015), is that the food has been dedicated to someone other than Allah (i.e., the Imams) and thus violates the Quranic prohibition against food over which any other name than Allah's has been invoked (Quran 2:173). This represents a fundamental theological disagreement. As my Shia informants repeatedly clarified, the Niaz is prepared *for* Allah, with the *thawab* (spiritual reward) merely *dedicated* to the *Ahl-e-Bayt* as a form of *tawassul* (intercession). In their view, this is no different from any Muslim performing a good deed and dedicating the reward to their deceased parents. The hardline critique, however, rejects this interpretation, framing it as an act of *shirk* (polytheism).

A second, related taboo is that the entire practice of Niaz is a *bida'ah*—a negative and heretical religious innovation that was not practised during the time of the Prophet (PBUH). This critique is famously articulated in reformist Sunni texts like Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi's *Behasti Zevar* (n.d.), which is a foundational text for many Sunni households in South Asia. This theological condemnation, amplified by militant groups,

translates directly into social stigmatisation. One of my interviewees, who lived in a rented property, narrated the painful experience of sending Niaz to their Sunni landlord's family, only to later discover that the food had been quietly discarded, untouched (Anonymous interview, 2024). This act of rejection is a powerful, non-violent social mechanism for enforcing sectarian boundaries, teaching children and neighbours that Shia food is "unclean" or "forbidden."

My interviews also revealed the existence of more sinister, folkloric taboos designed to inspire visceral disgust and dehumanise the Shia community. One participant, Farwa Kazmi, recounted an acquaintance asking her in all seriousness, "Do you people actually make the horse (*Zuljinnah*, the symbolic steed of Imam Hussain) eat from the cauldrons before you distribute the Niaz?" (interview, 2024). Another participant shared an even more horrific rumour they had heard: "Shia people put the blood of their deceased in their Niaz" (Anonymous interview, 2024). I suggest that these malicious falsehoods are not random; they are potent tools of "othering." By associating Shias with quasi-bestial or ghoulish practices, these rumours function to portray them as deviant, unclean, and fundamentally non-Muslim, thereby justifying social exclusion and, in the logic of extremists, even violence.

I found that these taboos and the very real threat of sectarian violence did not lead to the practice's decline. On the contrary, they reinforced Niaz as a core marker of what one historian has termed a "beleaguered but assertive" Shia identity (Rieck 2016). In response to these attacks, defending the practice of Niaz became synonymous with defending the faith itself. As the prominent Shia orator Syed Iqbal Shah Bajar (HR Azadari 2023) argued in a widely circulated *Majlis*, the *Koonday* Niaz is a non-negotiable symbol of Shia devotion to Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, and to abandon it would be to concede to the threats of extremists. The ritual, therefore, became even more deeply cherished as an act of spiritual and communal defiance. When the public space became hostile, the domestic space of the Niaz became an even more important fortress of identity.

The social landscape of Rawalpindi in the 2010s, scarred by decades of conflict and the post-9/11 "War on Terror," forced further evolutions. Security became the paramount concern for the state. As local media reported, authorities in Rawalpindi began to heavily regulate Muharram processions, including the distribution of Niaz (Yasin 2015). Organisers of *Sabeels* and Niaz stalls were required to obtain special permissions and verification cards from the local police, placing a significant bureaucratic burden on what was traditionally a spontaneous community activity. This securitisation transformed the atmosphere of the ritual, replacing a sense of communal generosity with one of tension, surveillance, and suspicion.

This increased securitisation had a direct and observable impact on the practice. I learned from my informants that many families and local groups who had for generations run large, public Niaz stalls along the main procession routes began to scale back. Fearing security threats (as Niaz stalls themselves became targets for terrorist attacks) and frustrated by the bureaucratic hurdles, they shifted their distribution. Many opted to prepare the same amount of Niaz

but distribute it from the security of their own homes or within their immediate, trusted neighbourhoods. This marked a significant, albeit partial, privatisation and decentralisation of a ritual that had once been defined by its mass public character. The ritual adapted to survive, retreating from the vulnerable public square to the fortified private home.

The Niaz itself also continued to evolve. While traditional, slow-cooked meals like Haleem, Daal Chawal, and Kheer remain beloved staples, especially for home-based Niaz (Yasin 2015), the Niaz distributed at large Imambargahs or by younger community members has globalised. It is now common to see biryani, chicken tikka, samosas, and even branded, packaged snacks and juice boxes being distributed. This culinary shift reflects broader economic changes, the need for convenience in mass distribution, and the changing tastes of the community, showing that the *content* of the Niaz is flexible, even if its *function* is sacred and unchanging. The blessing, my informants noted, is in the intention, not in the specific recipe.

The final and most dramatic shock to the practice came at the very end of my research period, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 and early 2020. This was an existential threat to a ritual defined by communal gathering and shared food. State-mandated lockdowns shuttered mosques and Imambargahs, and public health authorities explicitly forbade large gatherings, a policy that directly conflicted with the practice of *Majalis* and communal Niaz (Sobotková 2023). This forced the community to innovate in real-time, balancing sacred duty with public health.

The Shia community, drawing on the Islamic jurisprudential principle of *Rukhsah* (a concession or relaxation of rules in times of hardship), adapted the *form* of Niaz almost overnight. An interviewee poignantly described the change: "The Niaz of 22 Rajab (Koonday)... saw a relatively less participation due to its practice of dining in. Our... relatives didn't come but then we separated 14 puris and remaining Niaz was packed and sent to their homes" (Anonymous interview, 2024). Another participant recalled the main Imambargah in Saddar making a public announcement that its large Niaz on the 7th of Muharram was cancelled to protect the community (Anonymous interview, 2024). The practice instantly shifted from communal *dining-in* to individual *home delivery* and from large public gatherings to quiet, household-to-household drops.

I propose that this final, rapid adaptation shows the resilience of Niaz. Faced with a global crisis, the *form* of distribution proved entirely malleable (from public stalls to private homes, from communal dining to home delivery), but the sacred *function* of the ritual—as an act of piety, remembrance, and community care—remained inviolable and intact. The ritual did not break; it bent. This demonstrates that the Shia identity it supports is not a brittle relic of the past but a fluid, living, and durable phenomenon, capable of navigating and surviving sectarian persecution, state pressure, and unprecedented global crises. The Niaz, in short, is as resilient as the community that performs it.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to trace the 72-year trajectory of the culture of Niaz in

Rawalpindi, from the foundational moment of Partition to the global rupture of a pandemic. I have demonstrated that Niaz is far more than a simple, folkloric tradition of distributing food. It is a complex, multi-layered, and deeply significant ritual. I have shown it to be a dynamic and essential social ritual that served as a critical community-building tool for displaced Shia migrants in 1947, providing them with an immediate anchor of identity and social cohesion in a new land. I have argued that it is a central and indispensable practice for the cultivation of both individual and communal piety, theologically grounded in the core Shia tradition of emulating the self-sacrificial generosity of the *Ahl-e-Bayt*. Finally, I have documented its remarkable evolution—adapting to sectarian taboos, state securitisation, and public health mandates by changing its form while tenaciously preserving its sacred function.

In a theoretical sense, this case study of Niaz serves as a powerful confirmation of the Durkheimian model of ritual. It is precisely through this collective, effervescent act of cooking, sharing, and eating that the abstract beliefs of Shiism are "made real" for the community. The ritual charges the group with a collective energy and reinforces the "collective conscience," strengthening the bonds that tie individuals to each other and to their shared history. When this identity was politically challenged by the state or violently attacked by extremists, the ritual did not disappear. Instead, I argue, it became *more* important, serving as an act of defiance and a source of internal strength. Niaz is the living embodiment of the "beleaguered but assertive" Shia identity in Pakistan.

The culture of Niaz endures because it embodies the cardinal values of Shia Islam: remembrance of a sacred history, generosity as a spiritual necessity, and the creation of a bonded community. As my informants cited the words of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, "A believer's meal is with his brother" (interview, 2024). This principle, of feeding the community as an extension of one's own soul, remains profoundly relevant in a world marked by division. This study, focused on the specific case of Rawalpindi, opens clear avenues for future research. Comparative studies of Niaz culture in other major Pakistani cities, such as Karachi or Lahore, or in the global Shia diaspora in the United Kingdom, United States, or Australia, could reveal different and fascinating patterns of adaptation and evolution. I suggest, however, that the core function of Niaz—as a tangible, lived expression of faith and a testament to a community's enduring resilience—will remain constant.

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