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Exploring the Socio-Political Impact of Eid-Milad-un-Nabi Processions in Pothohar Region: A Transformation from Piety to Power"

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Abstract

The present study explores the origin of *Eid-Milad -un-Nabi* processions in Rawalpindi, with a focus to discuss how an occasion which was previously associated with religious piety converted into a show of power. The historical city of Rawalpindi used to house a mixture of many communities i.e., Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. In 1896 the construction of the famous *Jamia Masjid* became a bone of contention between Sikhs and Muslims. After just a couple of decades, the chosen locality and surrounding areas witnessed a massacre, this incident of violence within the Pothohar region took the lives of hundreds of innocent people. This was the time when Muslims started the procession of *Eid-Milad -un-Nabi*, in which thousands of Muslims participated. It was observed as a deviation from mere religious piety to a show of power. This research would also explore how the *Eid-Milad -un-Nabi* procession presently serves socio political purposes and its conversion into a method to satisfy intrinsic political interests. This project aims to delve into how the Bareilvis institutionalized *Milad* in their political activism, striving to reinstate piety within their political agendas and secure a prominent social space in society.

Keywords: Bareilvi, Milad Politics, Communal/Sectarian Violence, Muslims, Rawalpindi.



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1. Introduction

When the research embarked on the journey of exploring the theme of *Eid Milad -un-Nabi*, it anticipated a scarcity of available data connecting contemporary happenings with their historical origins. On contrary to the expectations, as the research delved deeper into this subject, it discovered an abundance of material, not only from Muslim scholars but also from the Western world, providing invaluable insider and outsider perspectives. One of the earliest traces of the event celebration, *Mawlid*/birth of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), can be found in the text *Kitab-al-Anwar*, traditionally associated with Abu-al-Hassan al Bakri (Katz, 2007, 09).¹ Dating back to approximately 694 AH/1295 CE, this work marks the starting point for understanding the roots of this significant occasion related to the *Mawlid* celebrations of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

As the research progressed, the researcher uncovered a treasure trove of information spanning from the historical *Kitab-al-Anwar* by Al-Bari to the contemporary scholarship of Dr. Tahir ul Qadri, who had published extensively from the platform of Minhaj ul Quran publication.² Many other Barelvi and Sufi scholars like Sultan Muhammad Najib-ur Rehman and his extensive publication under *Sultan-ul-Faqr* publications have diligently combined hadiths, verses of the Quran, and early records of *Milad* celebrations by influential Caliphs of Baghdad and the Fatimid Empire.³ This amalgamation of sources has shed light on the multifaceted aspects of *Eid Milad -un-Nabi* and its evolution over the centuries.

Literature Review shows a glimpse that the present *Milad* celebration of Sunni Barelvi and Sufis traditions have emerged from or have a great influence of *Shia* rituals from processions of Muharram and from commemoration of *Mawlid* of their *Imams* (Malik, 2022, 361). The zealous and static ritual of *Marseeya Khawani* (reciter of dirge) greatly impacts the practices of *Naat Khawani* (praising of Prophet) and *Qawali* (Sufi chants). Marion Katz also traces *Milad* 's celebrations from the early time of Fatimid Rule in Egypt 358AH/969 CE to 567AH/1171CE (Katz, 2007, 01). This fact broadens the academic debate more sensibly, as the Fatimid Caliphate was entirely in opposition to the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. In Cairo, Fatimid celebrated the birth of Imam Ali and his two sons Hassan and Hussain, that started this tradition of celebrating the birth of Prophet as well associating their faith to the family of Prophet, which is a fundamental belief of the *Shia* faith.

Another profound trace of *Milad* celebration is found in the history of the birthplace where Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was born in Makkah and the year is known as the year of Elephant in Islamic history where Makkah was besieged by Abraha the Abyssinian Christian ruler of *Aksum*. To explore that precise locality, in the mid-19th century Ahmad al-Hulwani, the pupil of a well

¹ For more detail see Marion Holmes Katz book where she has mentioned a significant detail about the early period of *Milad* celebrations “*The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam*.” (Publisher: Taylor and Francis Group), 2007. Although the book has details about *Milad* but she has stated that the original authorship of *Kitab-al-Anwar* is still unconfirmed.

² Dr. Tahir ul Qadri chairman and founder of Minhaj ul Quran (Minhaj Ul Quran a Sunni Barelvi Sufi welfare organization which has worldwide network) author of more than a hundred books on political Islam. Currently Qadri is a citizen of Canada and lives there after facing political setback in Pakistan.

³ Sultan Muhammad Najeer-ur Rehman author of several books on Sufi Islam and has a running Khanqah in Lahore Multan Road. The main purpose of his writings is to spread the teaching of Tasawwuf (mysticism) established by Sufi Saint Sultan Bahoo. For more details, follow the link below
<https://www.sultan-ul-faqr-publications.com>

renowned scholar of Al-Azhar university Ibhari al-Baguri wrote a detailed treaty about the birth celebration of Prophet Muhammad. He referred to the period of Abbasid Caliph Nasr-li-Din Allah (1180-1225) who demanded a house associated with the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad to beautify it in month of Rabi ul Awal. Hulwani also mentioned at that time that it was uncertain whether Prophet (PBUH) was born on 8th or 12th Rabi ul Awal but also said that in the ancient period Makkah and the Holy Kaba was a hub of such festivals related to the birth of Gods and Prophets in the Pre-Islamic period (Qadari, 2017, 06) Aisha bint Abi Bakr says, “No doubt the Holy Prophet and Abu Bakr have been mentioning about *Mawlid* in my presence.” (Rehman, 2021, 28).

The discourse surrounding the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad holds immense significance when delving into the historical roots of the institution of *Milad*. This debate offers an insight into the origins of the adoration of the Prophet associated with *Milad*, as historical evidence points to its commencement within the very house believed to be the birthplace of the Prophet. Nevertheless, central to this discussion is the holy city of Makkah, where a house bore the distinction of being Prophet Muhammad’s birthplace (Rehman, 2021, 87). Nestled near the revered Kaaba, this dwelling stood within the town of *Souq-al-Layl*, primarily inhabited by the Hashemites, the family lineage of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Interestingly, this town, alongside numerous other sacred sites in the Hijaz region, faced demolition in 1925 at the hands of the Ibn Saud dynastic rule. (*History of cemetery of Janat Al-Baqi*, 2013)

Sheikh Abdullah Ghazi, a distinguished chronicler specialist in the anthropology of the Hijaz region, has chronicled an era when a seminary thrived at the very location of *Bayt-Mawlid*, the birthplace of the Prophet. In later years, the old structure underwent transformation, yielding to the vision of the federal ministry of Haj & Umra. The result was the demolition of *Bayt-Mawlid* and construction of the Library Makkah-tul Mukarama, which now stands upon the sacred ground of the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad.

Yet, this evolution of the birthplace’s status and nature cannot connect to a single event. It mirrors the shifting sands of socio-political dynamics and the rise and fall of various regimes. Through the annals of time, starting from the early period of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 A.D) to the ascension of the Al-Saud dynasty in 1803, the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad has borne witness to numerous metamorphoses. (*History of cemetery of Janat Al-Baqi*, 2013) It has evolved from an unassuming abode into a symbol of prominence, particularly following the passing of the Prophet.

In the medieval era, a well reputed Muslim traveler named Muhammad ibn Ahmad Ibn Jubayr (1145-1217) chronicled his extensive journeys across Egypt and the revered cities of the Arab world. His travelogue offers intriguing insights into his observations during his time:

The birthplace of Muhammad stands as one of the most renowned and sanctified sites within the city of Mecca. This location holds the distinction of being the first on earth to have been graced by the virtuous presence of Prophet Muhammad. A mosque has been constructed on this sacred ground, and the very spot where the Prophet was born was adorned with a covering of silver, signifying its existence. This sacred space is open for all to visit during the month of Rabi-ul-Awal, specifically on every Monday. It is a time when people seek blessings, as this month and day are intimately associated with the Prophet’s birth. This momentous occasion grants access to all the other revered sites within Mecca. Monday in Rabi-ul-Awal consistently stands as a pivotal day in Mecca’s centuries old history. (Qadari, 2017, 08)

Another valuable historical account of the *Mawlid* celebration and the commemoration of Rabi-ul-Awal comes from Imam Qutab-ud-Din al-Hanfi (977 AH/1556), shedding light on the continued tradition:

The birthplace of Prophet Muhammad remains widely recognized in Mecca, drawing yearly pilgrims seeking blessings from this sacred site. Adjacent to this location is a mosque where individuals offer prayers. On the night of *Mawlid*, which falls on Monday, a grand assembly convenes to honor Prophet Muhammad's life and blessings. This gathering takes place within the esteemed Masjid-ul-Haram, the grand mosque of Mecca. Eminent scholars, theologians, governors, and Qazis representing all four schools of thought unite for this occasion. As the evening prayers, Maghrib, conclude, they assemble at the central mosque within the Haram and embark on a walk toward *Souq-al-Layl* to pay respects at Bayt-Mawlid/birthplace. Holding candles, flambeaus, and lanterns, the participants traverse this path. Once they reach the birthplace site, a distinguished scholar delivers a sermon, further elevating the significance of this event. (Qadari. 2017, 09)

Nevertheless, in essence, the historical writings of both Muhammad ibn Ahmad Ibn Jubayr and Imam Qutab-ud-Din al-Hanfi provide an intricate insight into the medieval Muslim practices surrounding the *Mawlid* and the commemoration of Rabi-ul-Awal, illuminating the reverence and devotion directed towards Prophet Muhammad and his birthplace in the revered city of Makkah. This historical trajectory underscores the profound connection between religion, culture, and history. It serves as a poignant reminder of how places which possess religious significance and practices that are connected to them can be shaped by the ever-changing tides of history and the influence of those in power. The debate on the birthplace of Prophet Muhammad and *Milad* celebration both offers not only a glimpse into the past but also a lens through which to examine the interplay of religious devotion and the dynamics of socio-political order of the Muslim world.

2. Contesting Debate on Permissibility of *Milad* in South Asia

To delve into the ongoing debate surrounding the history, nature, and influence of *Eid Milad -un-Nabi* in the South Asian context, one cannot overlook the significance of the polemic debates that unfolded among Salafi/Ahl e Hadith, Deobandi, Barelvi and Sufi scholars. It is intriguing to note that in the late 19th century, the adoration of the Prophet and the commemorative rituals in his honor became a contentious issue among different prominent religious persuasions (school of thought/*Makatib-i-Fiqar*) that had emerged during the British colonial era in India. At the heart of these polemical discussions were revered scholars from each prominent camp and the archrivals: Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi (Deobandi), and Maulana Ahmad Reza Khan from Barelvi sect discussed the issue of *Milad* to bring it into the limelight.

In Thanvi's view the permissibility of *Milad* has challenged the sovereignty of Allah through the performance of the specific ritual *qiyam* where all the participants must stand in honor of Prophet Muhammad. As Barelvis and many Sufis believes that Prophet himself is present at the gathering and He the Prophet attends all gatherings where the participants recall him or praise him (Tareen, 2020, 225). Thanvi and many others revered Deobandi ulema view this practice as under the realm of omniscience and omnipresence both purely divine attributes showing the simultaneous presence at multiple *Milad* gatherings. Which they believe directly undermine the sovereignty of Allah as these characteristics are strictly attached to Allah only. (Tareen, 2020, 225).

It is worth emphasizing that the crux of these debates revolved around the permissibility of celebrating *Milad*. In this regard, esteemed Ulema representing the Brelvi school cited references

from the Quran, specifically Chapter 11, Surah Younas, verse 58, and Chapter 21, Surah Al-Anbya, verse 107, arguing that it implies the celebration of the greatest blessing bestowed by God upon the people of the world. Ulema from the Salafi/Alh Hadith and Deoband on the other hand, not only questioned the evidence for such celebrations in the practices of the pious predecessors, the pious predecessors (Salaf⁷ as-sallheen) from the time of Prophet Muhammad but also contended that participating in *Milad* celebrations is forbidden (haram) in Islam (Sajjad, M.W. 2023). Figures like Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, among them, went beyond mere questioning and declared it haram to partake in gatherings where *Milad* was celebrated.

In response to these assertions from the Deoband school, Ahmad Reza Khan went as far as to declare Ashraf Ali Thanvi a *kafir* (infidel), (Fatawa Rizvia, vol 11) and anyone who considered Thanvi's stance as legitimate was also labeled as a *kafir*. Although Deobandis have much space for Sufi practices but Barelvis on the other hand were more attracted to Sufism and for them Prophet is not only a source of normative teaching but a presence that is alive all the time for guidance (Zaman, 2018, 16). In colonial era it was important for Barelvis as Dietrich Reetz says to start reformation of their ideas and consider Ahmad Reza Khan as a reformer and scholar first and Sufi at the later stage (Fucsh, 2019, 57).

Deobandi Ulema, in return, accused the Barelvi school of celebrating *Milad* in a manner reminiscent of Shia practices, drawing parallels to *Milad* commemorations during the Fatimid Caliphate in the 11th century. It is noteworthy that Ahmad Reza Khan himself vehemently criticized Shia rituals and practices, even considering it sinful to provide food to Shias during Muharram processions. He cautioned all Sunnis against participating in any such rituals, such as bringing an adorned horse (Shabi-e-Zuljnah) to Shia gatherings, deeming it haram. He further wrote that Shias should not be allowed to participate in *Milad* recitations and should be discouraged from participating in *Milad* celebrations.

In retrospect, this fatwa had a profound impact on the sectarian dynamics between Shias, Sunnis and Barelvi & Deobandis. It has not only altered the previous harmony between these groups during the gatherings of the 10th Muharram (Ashura) and *Milad un-Nabi* in Rabi ul Awal but also served to sharpen the Barelvi identity vis-à-vis both Shia and Deobandi schools simultaneously. Justin Jones made a very clear argument here as he says, the exclusion of Shias was engineered not by puritanical Deobandis but Barelvis. Though the impression is other way around and turns the argument but the colonial history in United province has shown that Barelvis were more anti Shia than Deobandis to prove themselves as true Sunni representatives (Jones, 2012, 16).

The analysis reveals that the *Milad* institution remains a focal point in the polemical debates between the Sunni Hanafi schools, including the Barelvi and Deobandi traditions. Interestingly, in post-colonial era when sectarian strife between Deobandi and Barelvi sects took a violent turn in Pakistan the Barelvis alleged Deobandis that they are assertive to celebrate second caliph's birthday to contain Shi'ism. While they are certainly against the festivities on birth of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Rieck, 2015, 97). These debates have played a significant role in further accentuating sectarian identities, with both sides adopting and rejecting practices that define their distinctiveness in relation to other sectarian groups. Both the *Milad* celebration and the Ashura procession serve as two prominent practices continually evolving and offering tangible examples of these ongoing polemical debates.

Given that the country predominantly adheres to Sunni Islam, the rise in prominence of the *Milad* institution has resulted in extensive criticism from sects that hold divergent views on the permissibility of *Milad*. Nevertheless, the issue of permissibility of *Milad* celebration has

influenced the sectarian dynamics in ruler Sindh and Baluchistan where Deobandi Madrasas have very strong hold to stop this ritualistic ceremony (Gugler, 2016, 10). Scholars from both the Deobandi and Barelvi schools place a strong emphasis on the love for Prophet Muhammad and the affirmation of one's belief in his personality. Consequently, this issue holds immense significance for the everyday Muslim who actively engages in religious practices and allocates a portion of their social life to religious causes. However, it's worth noting that the polemical debates and the theological contestation surrounding the *Milad* institution have expanded the portion of social life that a common Muslim previously dedicated to religious pursuits. Nevertheless, contemporary *Milad* celebrations serve as a reflection of the aspirations drawn from the guidance of senior scholars/*Akabireen* and underscore the differences in their approaches to the *Milad* institution.

3. Colonial Punjab, The City of Rawalpindi and Inception of *Eid Milad -un-Nabi's* Procession

As we have already witnessed that intra-Muslim polemical contestations on *Milad* were going on during the British Raj/time in Indian Sub-Continent but how a communal riot incident rig out to celebrate *Milad* in Pothohar region is a story of exclusion of all other inhabitants of the city Rawalpindi except Muslims. As Jamal Malik rightly argued, *Milad* institution is an institution creating exclusionist politics in modern times. This institution has history of exclusionist politics from a century back when a groundbreaking catastrophic event shaped the communal cum sectarian dynamics in a violent spectrum.

In the annals of Rawalpindi city's history, a profoundly significant event resides in the collective memory of its inhabitants. On the 13th of June 1926, a conflict erupted between Muslims and Sikhs, stemming from a dispute over the construction of a mosque (TCM Originals, This is how Eid *Milad-Un-Nabi* Started, 2023).⁴ The construction of this particular mosque held immense importance, as it was meant to serve as a central or Jamia mosque for Muslims during a period when there was no such central place of worship. This circumstance also highlighted that Muslims were not the majority or less influential in the interior of the city compared to Sikhs and Hindus. Furthermore, Muslims had limited financial and political influence, as the city's core was adorned with numerous Gurdwaras/Doors of the Sikh Guru and Mandirs/Temples, most of which were reserved for affluent families.

A renowned journalist from Rawalpindi, Sajjad Azhar has said it that when Afghan king Amanullah Khan sought exile in Rawalpindi, he pledged financial support for the construction of the Jamia Masjid. Consequently, in 1896, the foundation stone was laid on an 18 Kanal parcel of land, where the majestic Jamia Masjid now proudly stands. However, when Muslims initiated plans for its construction, Sikhs and Hindus expressed reservations (Azhar, 2023, 84). Adjacent to the mosque's location was a splendid Gurdwara associated with Sardar Sujana Singh's family, and the area was still known as *Bagh-e-Sardaran*, owing to a beautiful garden in front of the Gurdwara. Sikhs were adamant that the mosque should be built elsewhere.

⁴ In an interview a renowned journalist from Punjab and author Sajjad Azhar gives a detailed talk on how the procession of Eid *Milad un-Nabi* started from Rawalpindi after a conflict over the construction of a mosque. For more details, watch the interview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StC2qJoKNgg>

Amid this impasse over construction, the revered Pir of the Rawalpindi region, Pir Mehar Ali Shah,⁵ intervened. His fame, wealth, and charismatic persona among his followers endowed him with considerable influence. Ensuring that confrontation between the communities could be averted, Pir Mehar Ali Shah facilitated a resolution, and construction was completed in 1901 (TCM Original, 2023).

For the next 25 years, there were no recorded conflicts, and peace prevailed. However, tensions resurfaced when Sardar Mohan Singh, another influential local figure and chairman of the municipal committee of Rawalpindi, initiated the construction of a cinema not far from the Jamia Masjid. Muslims objected and took the matter to court but failed to secure a favorable outcome. This legal setback exacerbated the animosity.

In the months that followed, during the commemoration of their 5th Guru, Guru Arjun Singh, Sikhs embarked on their traditional procession route. Unlike previous years, Muslims withheld their cooperation, which had included providing *Sabeels* (drinking water for procession participants) for all processions. Instead, they warned Sikhs that, while passing the mosque, they should refrain from playing music or chanting slogans and proceed in silence (Azhar, 2023).

Moreover, Muslims have demanded the demolition of the cinema owned by Mohan Singh. These demands were initiated by the *mullahs* in Jamia Masjid. Molvi Ishaq ullah Manservi and his oratory added ferocity to the matter and the demands of Muslims tinted as religious piety. Sikhs rejected this demand, insisting on observing their traditions. Along with, tensions already simmering due to the cinema construction, Muslims prepared sticks and axes in case the procession disrespected the mosque. Sikhs were aware of these developments, resulting in an unusually high turnout of over 15,000 participants in the procession on the fateful 13th of June 1926.

As the procession passed in front of the Jamia Masjid, Sikhs continued to play music and chant slogans, despite Muslim protests that this behavior disrespected their mosque. In response, Muslims began pelting the procession with stones, igniting a night of violent clashes that spread throughout different parts of the city (Qureshi, A, 1983, 40)⁶. Notably, the area of Ganjmandi saw 276 shops belonging to Sikhs set ablaze. It is worth mentioning here that Damdama (resting place) of Baba Kheim Singh and the house of his grandson Tikka Sant Singh was set ablaze. Tikka Singh received this shocking news on a phone call when he was in Murree. On arriving at the location where he saw a mob setting fire to his grandfather's Damdama, he shot three revolver bullets and killed three Muslims to defend his life and property (Parbandhak Committee, 1926).

Kirpal Singh draws attention to another significant point which enables us to understand the Rawalpindi riots. He stated in one of his articles that in Punjab money lending was the largest commercial activity and agriculturists in Punjab were highly under the debt. Sikhs and Hindus were the money landers and Muslim rural class in West Punjab were the ones heavily under the debt. When the epidemic broke out in Multan 1922, most of the money lender Hindu and Sikhs abandoned their homes to save themselves. Their debtors found the opportunity well and looted their wealth and burned down all the records (Singh, 1981, 468-472). This event inspired the Muslims

⁵ Pir Mehr Ali Shah is renowned saint of Pothwar region buried in Golra Shreef present day Islamabad. Shrine of Golra has played an influential role in Pakistani politics especially in exclusionist politics. Pir Mehr Ali Shah is famous for his great resistance against Mirza Gulam Ahmad founder of Qadiani religion in South Asia.

⁶ Hakeem Hafiz Abdul Rasheed Qureshi an eyewitness of the violence that broke out in front of Jamia Masjid wrote about the incident in monthly Faiz-ul-Islam Publication. For more detail about Sikh Muslim riots in Rawalpindi at Jamia Masjid Road see Faiz-ul- Islam publication vol. 1983.

in Rawalpindi in 1926 when they took radical turn to free themselves from the debt they owned from religious other (Sikhs and Hindus).

On this catastrophic day police and city administration had a criminal negligence towards the unfolding events. Some people reported that instead of protecting people's lives and property, the police took part in setting shops on fire (Parbandhak Committee. 1926).⁷ For the next few days arson attacks continued throughout the city of Rawalpindi. The night was marred by brutal violence, resulting in numerous rapes of Sikh and Hindu women, deaths and several hundred injuries.

The following day, British law enforcement agencies imposed a curfew to regain control of the situation. After a few days, when tensions subsided, the Deputy Commissioner of Rawalpindi convened all concerned parties, including Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus. It was decided that Muslims would be allowed to commemorate and organize one such procession or a religious festival, including passing through Gurdwaras and Mandirs, just as Sikhs and Hindus did.

Considering this agreement and a managerial trick of British administration, Muslims chose to organize the *Eid-Milad-un-Nabi* procession, which had previously been famous as *Barah Wafaat* (the death anniversary of the Prophet) in the subcontinent. As in terms of festivities and also considering the sectarian tension within, there was no event that could unite Muslims for a procession and celebrations except *Milad*. Moreover, Northern Punjab was considered as low church Muslims, and it never was under influence of puritan Islam. Pothohar region carried the legacy of Sufis and Yogi traditions therefore the Muslims there decided to celebrate *Milad* according to their taste and ritualistic past and not under any Arabian or middle eastern influence.

In 1927, for the first time in Rawalpindi, the *Eid Milad -un-Nabi* procession was organized in front of Jamia Masjid and commemorated on the similar historical route where all other processions passed on. Sajjad Azhar stated in one of his talks that more than 1.5 million people attended this groundbreaking event, a remarkable feat considering that the city's total population at the time was less than 100,000. This event marked the inception of the tradition of the *Eid Milad* procession which was driven by political and communal basis. Nevertheless, this massive number of participants attending *Milad procession* was alarming, and it rang the bells loud and clear for the upcoming most violent episode of partition violence. An episode that causes more than 7 million Hindu and Sikhs to migrate from their homeland in West Punjab, Frontier region and in Kashmir (Talib, 1950, 14) but unfortunately authorities ignored the facts under criminal negligence.

4. *Milad* Institution in Post-Colonial State, Politics and City Administration in Rawalpindi

Since the inception of *Milad* celebrations in the late colonial and post-colonial period, the vibrancy of this event has burgeoned in our country with the state taking full ownership of its commemoration on a national scale. This transformation has given the entire procession a remarkable makeover. Families enthusiastically participate in *Milad* celebrations, where men organize grand gatherings and host *Muqabla-i-Naat* (competition of praising of Prophet) for the participants (Khawar. Mumtaz, personal communication, December 2, 2022). Women play pivotal roles in *Milad* preparations, managing household affairs and actively participating in the praise

⁷ For more details on Rawalpindi Riots (1926), see report maintained by Sirimoni Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee <https://archive.org/details/rawalpindi-riots-of-1926-sgpc-report>

competitions to win prizes. Some women even join *Milad* processions, marching alongside their male counterparts.

Children, doing new attire, eagerly embrace *Milad* as an annual Eid festival. Youngsters, just like all other national holidays in their exuberance, remove the silencers from their motorcycles, creating a resonant cacophony as they perform acrobatics along the iconic Murree Road and through the wide avenues of the capital city, Islamabad.

In the capital territory, all government offices, including the parliament house, prime minister's house, supreme court, radio Pakistan, foreign office, naval headquarters, and the general headquarters in Rawalpindi, along with the ISI headquarters, adorn themselves with splendid lighting, predominantly in green, echoing the color of the dome at the Prophet's grave. Decorating homes and markets has evolved into a spirited competition, seen as an expression of loyalty to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his birthday celebration.

Similar to the rest of the world, Pakistan relies on neighboring China for small-scale essentials. Affordable LED lights from China, capable of changing colors at night, aid Barelvi adherents in embellishing mosques, madrassas, and markets. Meanwhile, the government allocates substantial tenders each year to embellish its offices nationwide (The Nation, Sep 25, 2023).

Beyond these preparations, people generously distribute *Niaz* (food) *Mithai* (sweets) and *Sabeel* (arrangement of drinks) mostly with fresh water and milk. On this day, individuals can savor an abundance of food and refreshments, rendering the need for cooking or purchasing additional sustenance unnecessary. Barelvi and Sufi devotees regard this as the happiest day of the year and maintain that only Satan remains unhappy, refusing to partake in the festivities. Nevertheless, Mufti Ahmad Yar Khan Naimi, also wrote a famous praise where he outcasts all those who refrain to participate in *Milad* celebrations is as following

اول-ال-ربيع عیدیں ہزار پر پہل چہل تیری نثار
ہیں⁸ رہے مانا خوشیاں تو سبھی میں جہاں کی ابلیس سواے

All Joys are neglectable to the joy of Rabi-ul-Awal, everyone feels the rejoice except the Satan.

5. *Milad* Committees and Local Politics

To gain insight into contemporary *Milad* politics, it becomes imperative to dissect the information into discrete components and subsequently arrange it in a structured manner. In this context, Rawalpindi city emerges as a compelling case study, offering a window into the intricacies of current *Milad* politics.

In the endeavor to manage and oversee *Milad* celebrations, the local populace has established numerous *Milad* committees, which operate in conjunction with the city administration, primarily under the purview of the Commissioner's office and the regional police office. These committees have been officially registered by the city administration and are overseen by the *Aman Committee* (Peace Committee), comprised of esteemed Hanafi scholars at the district level. At present, the representation of this Aman Committee is vested in the district *khatib*, Muhammad Iqbal Rizvi, who currently serves as the prayer leader and Ameer of historic Jamia Masjid Rawalpindi. The *Milad* procession commences at the main gate of Jamia Masjid, and on the morning of every 12th

⁸ Mufti Ahmad Yar Khan Naimi is author of *Tafseer-i-Naimi* and a renowned scholar of Sunni Barelvi sect. He is considered as the grandson of Ahmad Raza Khan in reference to his literary contributions to the Barelvi sect. His poetry and praises changed the whole outlook of the celebrations of *Milad* as he criticizes ruthlessly to his sectarian other. For more details, see his book *Obliteration of Falsehood (Ja'Al Haq)*.

of Rabi ul Awal, a gathering assembles outside the mosque, featuring prominent clerics, members of the district *Aman committee*, the deputy commissioner, and the regional police officer, all converging for a ceremonial cake-cutting event (Jibran, Personal Communication, 2022).

In an interview with one of the local *Milad committee's* chairman, it is said that in the wake of communal riot event that took place in 1926, today's cake cutting ceremony outside the Jamia Masjid Rawalpindi is the official start of the *Milad* celebration in entire country. Senior Ulema from Bareilvi sect, including district *Khatib* Muhammad Iqbal Rizvi, Pir Syed Haseen ud Din Shah founding member of *Tanzim ul Madaris* Pakistan and founding father of Jamia Rizwia Zia al Uloom Rawalpindi, Pir Naqeeb ur Rehman from Eid Gah Sharif shrine, Sajjada Nasheen of Golra Sharif, custodian of Shah Chan Charagh Darbar/Shrine, custodian of Bari Imam Shrine Pir Syed Muhammad Ali Geelani, and many other highly influential personalities of the region vigilantly attend the ceremony every year along with the presence of city administration.

This gathering underscore the strong interdependence and symbiotic relationship between the city administration and clerics of the majority sects. Ulema and scholars also participate in these gatherings to fortify their personal connections with the city administration. Notably, local businessmen from Raja Bazar and its environs also partake in the cake-cutting ceremony, effectively transforming the gathering into an exclusive arena for networking and amplifying the religio-political and social dimensions of one's personal life.

The following are a handful of prominent and active *Milad* committees within Rawalpindi city, each year carving out significant social space for themselves through competition and, at times, exacerbating sectarian tensions in their activities:

- *Pak-Serat Milad Committee*
- *Bazm-e-Namos Risalat Committee*
- *Ashiqan Rasool Milad Committee*
- *Shah Chan Chiragh Milad Committee*
- *Anjuman Ghulaman-e-Mustafa Milad Committee*

Out of more than 300 *Milad committees* that are working in the city, the above mentioned *Milad committees* collaborate closely with the city administration and the district *Aman committee*. While there are numerous other committees that participate in the procession annually, a significant portion of them operate independently and are not registered under the district *Aman committee's* umbrella (The Express Tribune, Sep 18. 2023).

6. *Milad* Committee's Political Activism and Trader Nexus

One of the most intriguing aspects explored in this study pertains to the political activism of *Milad* committees. It is undeniably evident that the *Milad* institution bestows a profound sense of legitimacy upon these committees and those individuals who participate in the organization of *Milad* processions. In the contemporary landscape of *Milad* politics, the annual *Milad* procession becomes a collaborative effort among three major stakeholders: the clergy, city administration, and the trade union. This triumvirate collectively determines the practical manifestation of the *Milad* procession. The city administration exercises its regulatory authority over these local *Milad* committees through the district *Aman Committee*. Comprising the district *Khateeb* (scholars from central seminaries or mosques), the regional police officer, and members from the trade union, the

district Aman Committee plays a pivotal role in overseeing the proceedings (M.Rizvi, Personal Communication, 2023).⁹

It is noteworthy to acknowledge that the city center predominantly constitutes a bustling market—a vibrant amalgamation of various historic Bazars, including *Raja Bazar*, *Moti Bazar*, *Sarafa Bazar*, *Babra Bazar*, *Nankari Bazar*, China Market, and *Gawal Mandi*. The term “Bazar” is a local word for market, which is typically situated in close proximity to one’s place of residence. These aforementioned Bazars boast centuries-old legacies, previously owned by Sikhs and Hindus. The inception of Moti Bazar’s management dates back to the colonial era, established in 1901. History attests that during times of political strife in the city center, these Bazars have consistently played a crucial role.

The tragic event occurred in June 1926 which led the foundations for *Milad* celebrations in the region and beyond, the period was marked as domination or monopoly of Hindus and Sikhs over Rawalpindi city and its local Bazars. Rawalpindi’s development can be traced back to the 18th century, under the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. In 1814, Rawalpindi was annexed with Lahore, a decision met with resistance from the people of the Pothohar region, Margalla valley, and Murree. Subsequently, control over the entire region was ceded to Raja Gulab Singh of Kashmir, with the Raja Bazar being named in his honor. The period was marked as the hostile phase between Muslims and Sikhs community especially in Pothohar region. Later, the enmity was channelized by the British administration to dismantle the Sikh’s hegemony over social, economic and political resources (Jibran, 2022).

Coming back to comprehending the operational mechanisms of contemporary *Milad* committees, this study delves into the modus operandi of one such committee, the *Pak Serat Milad Committee*. This committee operates in the heart of Rawalpindi, exercising influence over the Raja Bazar, Dhok Ratta, and Jamia Masjid areas. Malik Jibran, the founder and former president of the *Pak Serat Milad Committee*, is a resident of Rawalpindi and a highly active figure in local politics. In an interview, he elaborated on *Milad* politics, emphasizing the significant roles played by the city administration and the trade unions in orchestrating the *Milad* celebrations annually.

It is worth highlighting that the *Pak Serat Milad Committee* serves as a clear example of leveraging religion as a political tool to gain popularity within a specific locality. The popularity derived from religious piety is channelized into religio-political activism, with a focus on securing the loyalty of the people by positioning oneself as the most devout and politically reliable advocate of the love of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Notably, the president of the *Pak Serat Milad Committee* contested local body elections for the chairmanship of the local union council and successfully assumed the role during a tenure under the regime of military dictator Parvaiz Musharaf.

In an interview the general secretary of *Pak Serat Milad Committee* said as following:

We have nothing to do with TLP (*Tehreek Labaik Pakistan*) nor we have anything in common. We believe in collective politics based on collective efforts of residents, trade unions and *Milad* organizations. Organizing *Milad* every year and love of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are true power for us (R. Irfan, Personal Conversation, 2023).

The endeavor to celebrate *Milad* in Pakistan’s fourth-largest city receives unwavering support and sponsorship from the city’s traders. Figures like Sheikh Nasir, a prominent businessman who holds

⁹ Muhammad Iqbal Rizvi is currently serving as district Khateb (official appointed speaker at district level), interviewed by the author on the topic of *Milad* Committee’s formations. He is currently designated as a prayer leader at the historic Jamia Masjid, Rawalpindi. dated March 2023.

the presidency of the *Markaz-i-Milad Committee* and owns multiple import businesses in the area, are among those who champion this cause. The trade community actively participates in *Milad* celebrations each year, generously sponsoring large gatherings that attract high-ranking officials from the city administration. In an interview, Malik Jibran, the former president of the *Pak Serat Milad Committee* and ex-chairman of UC-01 *Ratta Amral*, elucidates that the trader community's annual involvement in *Milad* celebrations is a strategic move aimed at solidifying their connections with the city administration, particularly high-ranking police officers (R.Irfan, 2023). This, in turn, facilitates the resolution of their personal and business matters, including securing the release of individuals involved in criminal cases and obtaining exemptions in taxation through the Federal Board of Revenue.

Conclusion

This study has explored the historical and socio-political transformation of Eid-*Milad-un-Nabi* celebrations in the Pothohar region, with a particular focus on Rawalpindi. Initially rooted in acts of individual piety, these rituals evolved into large-scale processions with significant political and communal implications. The research highlights that *Milad* celebrations, which date back to pre-Partition South Asia, were shaped by the colonial administration and broader societal changes, leading to a shift from collective religious observances to demonstrations of political power.

Key findings indicate that the colonial-era policies and intercommunal tensions, such as the 1896 Jamia Masjid dispute and the 1926 massacre, played a crucial role in radicalizing the *Milad* celebrations. Once celebrated in agony by Muslims in Rawalpindi, the processions have become tool for communal identity assertion, driving divisions and heightening religious competition. In post-colonial Pakistan, the institutionalization of *Milad* by the Bareilvi movement further amplified its role as a socio-political platform, reinforcing religiosity in public spaces and marginalizing both religious minorities and sectarian others.

The study underscores the dual role of *Milad* celebrations in fostering collective identity while also contributing to exclusionary practices. These findings are significant for understanding how religious practices can adapt to socio-political contexts, particularly in post-colonial societies. By examining the intersection of religion, politics, and identity, the research offers advanced academic debate into the transformation of public religiosity and its implications for communal relations in South Asia.

Future research could expand on this study by exploring similar transformations in other regions of South Asia or by investigating the evolving role of *Milad* celebrations in contemporary sectarian and interfaith dynamics. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of how religious traditions can serve as both unifying rituals and instruments of socio-political power.

Conflict of Interest

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