International Journal of Law Research, Education and Social Sciences

Open Access Journal – Copyright © 2026 – ISSN 3048-7501
Editor-in-Chief – Prof. (Dr.) Vageshwari Deswal; Publisher – Sakshi Batham

IJLRES

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Flavour of Shi'ism: Tabarruk in Moharram Mourning, Folk Literature and Awadhi Syncretic Culture

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Received 02 September 2026; Accepted 03 October 2026; Published 07 October 2026

Tabarruk in South Asian Muslim tradition has been a very prominent aspect of religious gatherings and ceremonies. It is usually a food item distributed at the end of the religious event. The tabarruk is distributed among the attendees of the Majlis by the host who organised the Majlis, and yields a powerful effect on how the Majlis goes. This paper examines the factors that shape the importance of tabarruk in Shi'ite culture. The paper conducts a preliminary survey of folk literature, stories and sermons that mention the tabarruk traditions of the past. The research uses a qualitative methodology that includes interviews with participants in these ceremonies and records their perspectives on tabarruk. The interviewees were selected from different classes and backgrounds to record the variation. The fieldwork took place during the Moharram days in the village of Rasoolpur, in the district of Raebareli. Theories on the intersection of food and religion, particularly those forwarded by Norman Wirzba and Trudy Eden, inform and aid the investigation. This research is likely to open this rich food culture to a more extensive analysis and observation through an introductory and exploratory presentation of this food idea and tradition.

Keywords: *shi'ite, tabarruk, majlis, karbala, moharram.*

INTRODUCTION

Tabarruk comes from the Arabic word 'barakah', which means blessings and is understood as something that will invite blessings. Tabarruk, as an idea, has been derived from the Qur'an, where many verses can be found mentioning that there were people, places and things which were blessed by God and became symbols which were attributed to him. It is usually best traced in the Quranic story of Yousuf and Yaqub, where Yousuf sends his shirt to his father Yaqub, and he is healed by the virtue of his shirt. In the Qur'an, chapter 12 and verse 93, it states, 'Go with this, my shirt, and cast it over the face of my father: he will come to see.'[1] This theory extends to many other relics like the Prophet's hair, which have been popularly accepted throughout the Muslim community without any disagreement of any kind. Zara Choudhary (2014) has also written about the 'Blessed Tree' under which the Prophet rested when he was going on a trip to Syria with his uncle, while he was quite young.[2] The details of the article mention the tree as something really sacred and transcendental. Tabarruk as an idea is also observed in pilgrimage practices where people kiss the Ka'aba and carry dates and the Zamzam water back with them to distribute among family and friends.

Apart from these uniformly and universally followed practices and ideas, there are also some practices which are mainly followed in South Asia. This research is based in India, and observes the Awadhi north-Indian belt, especially during the Moharram period, which is marked by mourning and majlis congregations, organised largely by Shi'ite Muslims, but the participation in these ceremonies is diverse and pluralistic in nature. The first ten days of Moharram were observed in the village of Rasoolpur, which comes under Raebareli district.

TABARRUK IN SOUTH ASIAN CULTURE

Tabarruk in South Asia can be most commonly observed in the *Dargaah*. The dargaah is an important site to mention with reference to tabarruk because of its large-scale acceptability among both Hindu and Muslim masses, the presence of various kinds of tabarruk and the demand for tabarruk. At Khwaja Gharib Nawaz's dargaah in Ajmer, there are two huge *deg*

[1] 'The Quran, Sura 12, Verse 93' (*Tufts University*) <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2002.02.0006%3Asura%3D12%3Averse%3D93> accessed 01 September 2026

[2] Zara Choudhary, 'The Blessed Tree: A Divine Reality' (*Sacred Footsteps*, 11 August 2014) <https://sacredfootsteps.com/2014/08/11/the-blessed-tree/> accessed 01 September 2026

(cooking pots) known as *Choti Deg* and *Badi Deg*. Regarding the *Badi Deg,* the website of the dargaah mentions, 'On the western side of the Darwaza lies the larger vessel, which was donated by Akbar in Hijri 976 (1569 A. D.) During Urs, about 100 mann of rice is cooked in this vessel, along with dry fruits and condiments. The preparation is called Tabarruk, and it is distributed amongst the destitute.'[3] The *Choti Deg* is recorded to have been gifted by Jahangir in 1615 A.D. and can 'cook about 29 quintals of Tabarruk.' One can decipher from this the mention of the Mughal rulers and their contribution to the tabarruk tradition of the dargaah, that it was not something that was ignored or consigned to oblivion during that time; rather, it received royal support and encouragement. The tabarruk distributed at the dargaah is *dalya* (porridge) of wheat and barley. Even the *chadar* (a sheet of cloth laid upon the grave of the saint) is taken away by pilgrims or gifted to them as a tabarruk.[4] These *chadars* keep arriving in huge numbers as pilgrims of the shrine bring offerings such as rose garlands and large pieces of cloth to perform the ceremony of laying the cloth (chadar charana).[5] Therefore, excess chadars after the *Urs* (annual event which is held at the Sufi saint's shrine which marks either his date of death or birth) are donated or given away as Tabarruk. Although now one can see many online portals operating in the name of Ajmer Sharif dargaah, which sell these chadars as relics. The claim behind selling these chadars goes back to the idea of these chadars being a tabarruk or something that invites blessings.

Tabarruk, in South Asia, though, is not limited to dargaahs, and massive tabarruk distribution takes place beyond the dargaahs as well. Beyond the boundaries of Sufi practice, in many places, after the end of *taraweeh* (Ramadan night prayers, usually performed by Sunni Muslims), sweets are often distributed. There is also a tradition usually followed in Saharanpur district of the Northern Provinces in India, where the chapter Mulk is recited from the Qur'an on a roti, which is then called *tabarak roti*, after the completion of the recitation of the chapter. These practices are supported by almost all sections of Muslims.

[3] 'About Dargah Sharif' (*Ajmer Gharib Nawaz*) <https://ajmergharibnawaz.com/about-ajmer-dargah-sharif/> accessed 01 September 2026
[4] 'Ajmer Sharif Chadar Online Mannat & Shahi Chadar at Ajmer Dargah' (*Syed Ajmer Sharif*) <https://www.syedajmersharif.com/ajmer-dargah-chadar> accessed 01 September 2026
[5] '808th ʿurs festival of Khwaja Muʿin al-Din Chishti at the Ajmer Sharif Shrine' (*Sara Kuehn*) <https://www.sarakuehn.com/research/sufi-festivals-in-south-asia> accessed 01 September 2026

TABARRUK IN MOHARRAM MOURNING

During the Islamic months of Moharram and Safar every year, commemorative gatherings of the tragedy of Karbala called as *majlis* are held, which are organised usually by Shi'ite Muslims, but are attended by members of all communities. These *majalis* (plural) usually discuss the events of the tragedy of Karbala, where Hussain, the Prophet's grandson, was martyred, in a state of thirst, hunger and helplessness, at the battlefield of Karbala. It is usually at the end of Majalis that the tabarruk is distributed among the attendees.

The relationship between tabarruk and majlis is close and has also been noticed by Toby M. Howarth and recorded in his popular work in this domain, which is titled *The Pulpit of Tears* (2001). Attention is also given to the varieties of food and drink served at the gatherings and other such details. One famous annual majlis, for example, hosted by the private secretary to the Prime Minister, Sayyid HâdîcAlî, was known as the 'cold coffee majlis' because that was the form of tabarruk [blessed offering] that was traditionally served. Other forms of tabarruk mentioned are fruit, chinabowls, money wrapped in handkerchiefs, Kashmiri tea and Ethiopian sweets.[6]

He points out to this factor that it does not suffice to say that tabarruk is connected and recognised by the majlis; rather, it can also happen that the reference is inverted and the majlis itself comes to be recognised by the tabarruk. This shows the importance that tabarruk has on the participants in these ceremonies. Another important point that needs to be highlighted in this excerpt is that Howarth stresses tabarruk being 'traditionally served'. Tabarruk is not only limited to a food item that is randomly chosen; rather, families often have their own unique variety of tabarruk, which is traditionally prepared, and its recipe is generationally transmitted or maintained.

During fieldwork for this research, in Rasoolpur village, which is covered under the Raebareli district, a family presented a distinct tabarruk which was made by soaking the grams in sugar syrup and then drying it out under the sun. After the sugar coating, dry fruits were mixed with the sugar-coated grams, which made for a sweet snack. This was their traditional tabarruk, which was being followed for at least two decades or more. In the same village, some families that organised the majlis had kept certain days for a certain type of tabarruk. The oldest *imambada*

[6] Toby M Howarth, *The Twelver Shi'a as a Muslim Minority in India: Pulpit of Tears* (Routledge 2011) 25

of the place distributed sweetened milk and tea on the night of the seventh of Moharram, fruits on the night of the eighth of Moharram and boiled eggs and tea on the morning of the tenth of Moharram. Another family which organised a majlis in their house had fixed the date as the seventh of Moharram to distribute glasses. The *Pathri-Darwaza Imambada* (Imambada of the stony gate) distributed a special sweet dish called *laddus,* and the majlis was famous as 'laddu *wali majlis*' (the majlis of laddu). Some houses established new tabarruk traditions, like the family of the late Hasan Mawla began distributing cotton handkerchiefs, while another family began serving porridge on the night of the ninth of Moharram.

The Tabarruk is seen by the participants in these mourning commemorations from varied positions. One group considers Tabarruk has become a material gain which has outweighed the spiritual and didactic purpose of the Majlis, as a professor whom I interviewed said, 'The community has been sold for Tabarruk. This material possession has suppressed the real value of a Majlis.' Another group considers Tabarruk equally important as the Majlis, and would claim that it helps more people attend the Majlis, and it is also a common observation that a Majlis which is followed by a dinner or lunch, as Tabarruk, is likely to attract more audience. There is another section which considers that Tabarruk is even more important than the Majlis, and often in places where many Majalis take place on the same day, people pay more attention to the Tabarruk than the Majlis sermon. When asked about this conduct, a participant replied, 'Every majlis contains the same message; how many times should we listen to the same thing?'

TABARRUK IN FOLK LITERATURE

Folk literature around tabarruk often focuses on the transcendental aspects of food served as tabarruk. It is seen as a divine presence and is dealt with with sincere devotion by the participants. The folk literature captures this feeling and relates it to Hussain and his state of thirst and hunger. There is this popular belief that God oversees the distribution of tabarruk and provides sustenance to the one who distributes tabarruk. Often there are stories told during the majlis where a person was undergoing financial difficulties, but still, he managed to host a majlis and distribute the tabarruk through divine aid.

A sermon, available online, from Maulana Wasi Hasan Khan, a popular cleric, tells the tale of a mourner who sold his son in exchange for money to arrange for tabarruk but later had his son returned to him through divine help. In another sermon, it was told that a person used to

distribute the tabarruk every year, but one day his servant went to the market and brought cheaper biscuits to distribute for the tabarruk. He later saw in a dream that the details of tabarruk were presented to Hussain in heaven, and there he saw that the amount spent for tabarruk was written as less than what he had asked the servant to spend. The next day, he called his servant and asked him about the expenditure, and he accepted that the decrease in expenditure arose from the inferior quality of biscuits chosen for tabarruk. Thus, tabarruk not only transcends in its material form; rather, it transcends as a relation to the presumed heavenly status of Hussain in the Shi'ite imagination.

Sometimes Tabarruk also becomes a point of contest between groups who support or discourage Tabarruk. A couplet from a trending poet, known by the name of Shams Tabrez, is as follows:

Majlis ke Tabarruk jahaan baate nahin jaate
Un logon se hum bhi kabhi milne nahin jaate[7]
(Wherever Tabarruk is not distributed after Majlis,
We don't even consider such houses worthy of a visit)

Many clerics have condemned such poetry as sectarian and divisive in nature. Tabarruk is also condemned by certain clerics as having been overemphasised in the majlis gatherings and encouraged going back to simpler forms like sweet-shop-produced *namakpaara* or *samosa*. Some have even encouraged distributing packaged water bottles. The rationale provided by clerics like Akhtar Abbas Jaun is that overemphasising tabarruk promotes a materialist tendency, and the battle of Karbala was actually a battle against materialist tendencies of that time which were being promoted by the ruler.

Folk literature, though, is not only restricted to sermon debates and poetry, but also extends to memoirs and oral history. In the village which was studied, we saw that tabarruk had a traditional narrative and discourse as well. For example, while telling about the grand processions that used to happen in the past, a participant in the mourning gatherings said that there used to be elephants in the procession and that from there *rotis* were distributed. The tale has come down multiple generations and has now attained the status of the myth of the golden

[7] Hussain o Karbala, 'Janab Shams Tabrez Majlis Ka Jaha Par Tabaruk Bate Nahin Jate' (*YouTube*) <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/OCqqkSQnock> accessed 01 September 2026

times. This was idealised and even looked forward to by the other participants in the mourning sessions.

TABARRUK IN AWADHI SYNCRETIC CULTURE

Earlier, Tabarruk used to be complete feasts, as during the time of Nawabs, almost all huge gatherings ended in collective eating on a long tablecloth laid out on the ground, known as *dastarkhwan*. Then, with time, sweets prepared by local sweets shop owners or homemade recipes that could be carried began to be distributed, like Rotis, Kheer, or Biryani. With the dawn of the era of packaged foods, biscuits, chips, and even packed soft drinks have gained popularity. The rise of the private sector and the working status of female members of the family have made it difficult to prepare numerous units of tabarruk at home, and home-made tabarruk is slowly fading from the cultural landscape.

Awadh rulers such as Asaf-ud-Daula and his predecessors used to distribute tabarruk in large numbers. They often took part in the preparations as well. On their return home, the rich distributed food, money, and clothes to the poor. The horse *Duldul* and his expensive attire were donated to a poor Sayyid family. This occurred during the period of King Nasiruddin Haider.

Royal estates had their own forms of tabarruk. For example, the Mahmudabad estate distributed sheermal, kebabs, and dishes made of meat, while the Pirpur estate distributed food made from lentils and rice. About a century ago, Muharram rites were transcommunal in nature. Not only high-caste Hindus, but also labourers and artisans participated in and observed these rituals. During the period of Wajid Ali Shah, majlisi pasanda, also known as kebab, was a famous form of tabarruk. He also distributed dates and cereals. In earlier times, his predecessor, the queen consort Bahu Begum of Faizabad, was widely known for distributing lavish sweets and food among the people there. According to some oral historical narratives, as narrated in an interview by a Librarian of the Shia P.G. College, Lucknow, during the era of Nawab Asaf-ud Dawlah, all meat curries in the Tabarruk were replaced with Potato Curries to make it possible for Vegetarian members of the other communities to also take part in the Mourning sessions and also take away with them the Tabarruk of the Majlis. During fieldwork in the village of Rasoolpur, a Hindu participant, Narayan, said that he never missed out on tabarruk and collected it after every Majlis.

CONCLUSION

Miroslav Volf (1998) indicates that the divine persons 'are not simply interdependent and influence one another from outside, but are personally interior to one another.'[8] Tabarruk can be read and interpreted in this light as being an inward influence. It not only establishes a community bond through sharing of food and other related items, but also leads to an inward transcendentalism where the divine is not out and beyond. This not only creates a community feeling rather than a familial bond because usually food practices like eating together, preparing meals and consuming similar food, and then being able to discuss over it have a close resemblance to a family system rather than individualistic eating habits. Therefore, the idea of being personally interior to one another suits the concept of tabarruk. Norman Wirzba (2011) comments on this analysis, 'In other words, mutual indwelling, the other-in-me and myself-in-another, is at the heart of true reality. True life is lived through the gifts of others. As our experience with eating confirms, insofar as a living being attempts to be autarchic (a self-originating and self-sustaining being), it denies all nurture and so precipitates its own death.'[9] Here again the idea of 'gift' captures exactly what tabarruk is, a divine gift through a human agent.

Trudy Eden (2011) notes, while commenting on the philanthropic works done by the Unity Society of Practical Christianity, established by Charles Filmore and Myrtle Filmore, in his essay, "Metaphysics and Meatless Meals", that 'food has been a useful tool for Christians since the Middle Ages: the uses to which it has been put are many. Three of those uses practised by the Fillmores are evangelisation, the use of the commensal power of food for group coherence, and the sacramental use of food to achieve spiritual regeneration.'[10] Tabarruk for the Shi'ite community in North India has been a prominent tool of popularisation of their faith. During the fieldwork in the village of Rasoolpur, it was noticed that there were groups of children who moved from majlis to majlis but were not Shi'ite; rather, they came for tabarruk specifically. Some belonged to the Sunni community, while some were Hindus. This was told by participants: earlier, the crowd for tabarruk used to be larger, and some even paid attention to the things being

[8] Miroslav Volf, '"The Trinity Is Our Social Program": The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement' (1998) 14 Modern Theology 409 <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00072> accessed 01 September 2026

[9] Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith : A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge University Press 2011) 9-10

[10] Trudy Eden, *Metaphysics and Meatless Meals* in Ken Albala and Trudy Eden (eds), *Food and Faith in Christian Culture* (Columbia University Press 2011) 172

told in majlis, but with rising sectarianism and communal feelings, this has decreased, and now only children attend these majalis for tabarruk, so tabarruk has acted as a social service wing for the Shi'ite community through which they can reach out to other communities and also develop cordial bonds with them. The recent rise in the popularity of the Arbaeen walk has inspired youth and adults alike to look at Tabarruk as a form of social work and Community service, and now Blood Donation Camps, roadside water distribution stalls and food packet distribution drives are becoming popular as part of the Moharram initiatives.

Tabarruk, therefore, can be seen to fulfil multiple functions at the same time. It strengthens the community by including a factor of dependent participation, where the arrangement and distribution of tabbaruk becomes an act of transaction. Tabarruk also acts as a way of introducing one's community to the general public as a minority community and acts as a friendly expression of their faith. Tabarruk can also be seen through the lens of faith and devotion, as something which the participants see as having been given to them by the Prophet's grandson, Hussain, and thus value it. Tabarruk therefore becomes an integral part of the majlis sessions, and thus Moharram mourning, even though it might not be explicitly visible on streets, has a huge role in bringing participants to offline majlis, in an era where online majalis are covering a lot of ground.