



Punjabi Hawker, c. 1901 to 1909

Said Ahmed Shah

Hawker and religious leader

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A hawker from the Punjab region of India, Said Ahmed Shah was only 38 years old when he was murdered in a property dispute at Warburton on Sunday 2 April 1911. He was an important man in the tiny Muslim community in Victoria, their 'High Priest' at a time when there was no mosque and no permanent Imam, a respected man who oversaw the religious duties that under other circumstances would have been fulfilled by a formally trained Imam.

The men were mostly Indian, many from the Punjab, and most of them, including Said Ahmed Shah, worked as hawkers, a trade common among younger Indian men, as they could set up business with very little capital. They filled their horse-drawn carts with merchandise, often supplied by Indian or Syrian merchants, and travelled the countryside selling their wares. Although there was no mosque and the men were scattered throughout Victoria, this was a tight-knit community. There were places set up as religious centres in Fitzroy and Carlton and the community got together in the Fitzroy Gardens to celebrate major Muslim festivals, such as the end of Ramadan.

The style of Shah's grave is worth noting. The headstone itself is simple, conforming to the Muslim requirement that headstones are kept simple, noting the deceased's name and date of death only. In Arabic is written the first of the five pillars of Islam, the Muslim profession of faith, the Shahada: 'There is no god but God and Muhammed is the prophet of God.' The vault-like frame covering the grave is reminiscent of the domes in Mosques, signifying the vaults of heaven and the sky.

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