

SHRINES AND RELIGIOSITY: THE SOCIOECONOMIC FUNCTIONS OF SHRINES IN POTOHAR REGION

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Abstract

Religion is an important structural and functional unit of society. Shrines are supported by school of thought in Islam termed as Sufism. An important portion of Muslim population are devoted to Sufism. Designed qualitatively, this study aims to know about the socio-economic functions of shrines. This study has been conducted in Potohar Region including Northern Punjab and West of Azad Kashmir. As per study design, purposive sampling technique has been used to select samples from the population of interest whereby three shrines were sampled. Key informants have been used to get access to and collect information in the sampled shrines. In-depth interviews and three months of participant observation have been used to collect data. The data has been analyzed qualitatively. Findings show that shrines are important aspect of Sufism and performs many functions. It includes spirituality as a mean of psychological satisfaction. Spirituality and shrines are closely linked and religious practices and devotion to shrines is a source relieving stress and anxiety. Spirituality and shrines provide meaning to life of the believers and is associated with peace of mind and satisfaction. Further, shrines perform numerous economic functions (such as source of food for the needy through Langar). Shrines have certain social and cultural functions such as interaction among the local community and the believers, relationship extensions and celebration through Urs, social control etc.

Keywords: Spirituality, Shrine, Social Function, Belief, Religiosity

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Direct and indirect contact with the divine is one of the key discussions in religious studies. Direct contact with the divine includes prayers, fasting, pilgrimage and other practices. Indirect contact includes prophets (primarily in Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and other individuals such as Buddha. Like other religions Islam has its own and unique concept of contact with Allah. For example, it includes direct contacts (e.g. Namaz, Hajj, Roza etc.), and indirect contact (e.g. Prophet P.B.U.H.), and Auliya Allah etc. Allah (creator) communicates to his creature through Holy Quran, dreams, *Ilham*, *wahi*, miracles. However, it is also important to mention that the contact and communication between God and Human (in any religion) isn't so simple to be understood (Clymer, 1906). For instance, it is simple to understand about prayer, pilgrimage, zakat and other practices like these, but it is quite difficult to understand and interpret about Miracles and Wahi (through dream etc.) (see Lawrence, 1921).

In context of Islam, these all concepts are linked with the Holy Prophet and Walis (saints). Linked to it is other individuals known as Sufi (s). This embodies a set of practices (prominently attached with Wali/Sufi) termed as Sufism (in Islam). Similarly, shrines are the sacred places whereby followers have emotional attachments. These emotional attachments are embedded in belief and faith. But first it is important to mention that what is meant by Shrines in Islam (particularly Sufism)? Shrines are socio-religious-cultural places where Sufi saints are buried. These places are symbol of purity, sacredness, knowledge, grace and spirituality (Scupin and DeCorse, 2000).

The first and foremost eminence of the shrines for the followers is faith and belief in spiritual healing through shrines. Thereby, it involves all the socio-economic matters of their lives e.g. individual, familial, economic, and even political matters. Followers relieve their stress and anxiety related to their lives through belief and faith attached to shrines, and thereby shrines are functional to society (Kottak, 2002). Extending the discussion, shrines are functional to society in a particular way, for instance, keeping in view the above-mentioned aspects of human life, shrines provide meaning to life of an individual (see Sheldrake, 2009).

By provision of meaning to an individual's life, Sufism and shrines become an internal aspect of one's personality. In this connection, it plays a pivotal role in maintaining peace of mind by providing answers to unanswered questions in one's life (Wright, 2005). This further is associated with satisfaction in one's life. Extending the discussion over its functions, Paloutzian and Park (2005) illustrates that shrines and spirituality is source of value internalization. Value internalization is linked with social control in society. Therefore, it is evident that shrines are important to spirituality, and spirituality is important for social control. Flanagan and Jupp (2007) affirms spirituality and shrines do so because they are part of religion. Taliaferro and Marty (2010) adds that answer to unknown questions leads to self-control, self-actualization and refusal to certain desires.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The prominent objective of this study is to about the role of Shrines in maintaining spirituality of the followers. The study aims to know about the emotional attachment of followers with the Shrines and the basis on which they have such an emotional attachment. Following it, this study explores the role of shrines and spirituality in peace of mind, satisfaction in life, and social control.

METHODOLOGY

This study is framed under qualitative research design. Anthropological studies primarily are carried under qualitative research design. Keeping in view the design of the study purposive sampling has been utilized. The purposeful criteria included:

On the basis of the mentioned criteria 3 shrines were sampled including The Shrine of Hazrat Fazal-ud- Deen Chishti Sabri Kayami, The Shrine of Syed Abdullah Shah Naqshbandi Bangali Gujer, and The Shrine of Hazrat Syed Abdul Latif famous as (Bari Imam). Among these shrines the researcher first identified strong believers through key informants, and therefore identification of key informants was another aspect in the sampling process. The list of key informants for this particular study is as below (upon the consent of the key informants):

1. Malik Ahmer Awan for the The Shrine of Hazrat Baba Fazal-u-Deen Chishti Sabri
2. Syed Muzmil Hussain Shah for The Shrine of Hazrat Shah Abdul Latif Qadri Qazmi Mashhaddi
3. Syed Sultan Ali Shah for The Shrine of Syed Abdullah Shah Naqshbandi Bangali Gujer

These key informants assisted the researcher to get access to the shrines, and particularly arranging interviews with the respondents. The involvement of these key informants also played an important role in rapport building. In addition to it, participant observation has been done. The research spent three months in shrines. Access and facilitation was provided through key informants. Field notes were recorded in diaries in order to have better memory of events in the field. An interview guide was designed in relevance to objective of this study to collect information from the

respondents. As per study design, the collected information has transcribed, and discussion has been done to extract findings.

Results and Discussion

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE RESPONDENTS

In terms of gender, male respondents were in slight majority. The study's locality primarily is patriarchal, and thereby lineage and descent in terms of caretaking and belief are transferred to male. Majority of the respondents belonged to joint family system whereas few belonged to nuclear families. The family system is important regarding this study as lineage is an important aspect of devotion and belief on shrines and Sufism.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS

The collected information through in-depth interviews elucidate that shrines have numerous functions which are psychological in nature. It is true because many studies have proved that religion is an important source of psychological satisfaction, for instance, it reduces stress and anxiety by providing meaning to life of an individual. Elliott, M. & Hayward (2009) asserts that religion is important to human life for psychological well-being. Neal and Gail (2019) found that individuals who are more religious are less vulnerable to psychological problems particularly daily life stress and anxieties. The same has been found in the in-depth interviews. Few extracts are mentioned as under:

"...darbar (shrine) keep me calm. I visit here every evening, and the stress of the whole day is released..."

Another respondent explained that:

"... passing time in darbar provide relief to my mind. Whenever I am in problem the prayer in darbar helps me to relieve stress and worry..."

Spiritual healing has been found another important function of shrines. The study's locality is residence to Muslim population, and among Muslim there is a strong belief on life after death. There is concept of sins and virtues in Islam. Muslims are socialized in a way that sin and virtue is part of routine life. It is a fact that believers consider and think about all of these acts in context of sin and virtue. The belief is further associated with damage to the soul of a Muslim who is a sinner. However, Islamic belief also provides an opportunity to heal from the damage done to the soul because of sin. This is called spiritual healing, and findings show that shrines play pivotal role in spiritual healing and well-being. Levin (2001) talked about belief and said that:

"religious belief is a key factor in preventing distress and promoting well-being"

In this regard, a respondent named Ali Raza shared his experiences and stated that:

"...I am mureed¹ of pir Syed Abdullah Shah Hamdani Bhangi Sharif. I was in army, and upon retirement I got depressed primarily because of the life I spent in army's job. I lost interest in my kids, wife and relatives and my health was affected by my mental state as well."

¹ Mureed is an important concept in Sufism. It refers to an individual one who seeks and is committed to murshid. Mureed is a devoted person to a shrine and murshid (Brill, 1993).

The concept of Shifa is another psychological dimension associated with shrines. Strong belief of the believers on darbar and Pir leads to reduction in stress and anxiety during physical illness. Believers visit shrines to perform prayer in order to get rid of health-related issues. Though modern scientific knowledge negates it, but one thing is certainly true e.g. the reduction in stress and anxiety during chronic and fatal illnesses. A respondent stated that:

“...my mother died of cancer. I was 24 years old at that time. I was very stressed at that time. After 7 months I visited darbar and offered prayer there. Since, then I found that peace in my life. Now I see a lot of ill coming to darbar and I am witnessed to many getting well...”

ECONOMIC FUNCTIONS

Data collected from the respondents indicate that shrines have many economic functions. In this regard, the most important and noted one is provision of food and fulfilment of the needs particularly of the poor. There is a ritual of food proving to the pilgrim of shrine. This food giving is called *Langar*². A respondent told that:

“...I have faced many economic difficulties few years back. My family was hungry, and Langar was the only source of fulfillment of our needs. I sat in darbar for hours daily and offered prayers to change my life. It happened. Now I am able to donate for Lnagar and I feel that there are many like me, and Allah will reward me....”

Self-esteem also an important aspect of the economic functions of shrines. The economic support is provided without knowing the giver and the taker. This do not lead to any damage to the self-esteem of a needy person. A respondent explained that:

“...in darbar a needy person isn't insulted. The alms are given by people by the name of Allah and the Murshid. There is no direct contact between the giver and the taker. This do not affect the dignity of the needy person. And the darbar is open for every needy....”

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FUNCTIONS

Interaction is the most important social function of shrines in the study's locality. The social function or interaction through shrines can be explained in two dimensions; first, the direct interaction among the people or residents of the local community. Second, the social functions embedded in the cultural activities.

Regarding the direct interaction among the people or residents of the local community field information show that it leads to unity among the locality. The believers gathering in a same place and following the same patterns is a source of unity which further is associated with other forms of social interactions such as familial interaction, marriages, knowing about the problems of each other, economic support etc. A respondent explained that:

“...in this darbar people meet with each other. They talk to each other regarding their daily activities. They assess their problems and help each other....”

Another respondent told that:

²The word Langar is Punjabi word. It refers to the whole process of donating, cooking and providing food to the visitors to a darbar (shrine) and particularly to those work, offer prayers in shrine and are poor (Vasudeva, 1964).

“... believers from the local community interact here. They even extent their relationships from darbar. Believers of the same murshid are united in every sphere of life...”

Regarding social functions embedded in cultural activities field information shows that shrines are center to many cultural activities. These primarily are rituals, for example, the most notable and well known is Urs and Qawali. People (believers) from far away areas and from the whole country visits and celebrates Urs. A respondent explicated that:

“...Urs is the major religious and cultural activity of this darbar. Believers from the whole province come here to celebrate it. It is like Eid for us. We find mental satisfaction in it as well as mureeds from different area come together....”

Social control is known to be an eminent function of religion right from the beginning of human history. The collected information indicate that shrines are pivotal to social control in the community through beliefs and believers. For example, a respondent stated that:

“...the prayers and time spent in darbar provides me with peace of mind. The teaching of Pir and Wali makes me to behave in appropriate manner. It prevents me from wrong doings...”

Another respondent stated that:

“...darbar is the place where I found that many sins, we do are unnoticed. I am thankful to the teachings which made me aware of manners of spending the life...”

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

It has been noted that certain people have strong belief on Sufism whereby shrines are important to it. The believers in shrines perceive that they are connected to Allah through Pir. This is a spiritual phenomenon. Shrines are the places where the graves of Wali are situated, and there is an individual who is highly regarded religiously, and the believers perceive that they are connected to Wali through Pir and then to Allah through Wali.

Shrines have been noted as a central place of spirituality through religious practices. Religious practices enhance spirituality which further is associated with provision of meaning to life. Meaning to life is important for satisfaction in life and reduction in stress and anxiety which may due to day to day issues, illness, economic problems etc. Such have been noted regarding believers in the shrines. One of the mostly noted phenomena was the belief and practices in shrines regarding problems. For example, believers offer prayers in shrines to contact Allah to cure their illness (particularly chronic and fatal), solving their economic problems, familial problems etc. During observation it has been noted that many of the believers returned to shrines and contributed on the name of Allah as they perceived that their problems have solved through the Karamath (miracles) of Wali and Pir.

Economic support to the needy is one of the key observations. Langar is the most important economic activity in shrines. It is a daily base activity. Visitors and needy visit shrines to eat and offer prayer. The wealthy believers have been found to contribute significantly to the shrines. Along with Langar, wealthy believers also support the poor suffering from illnesses to carry out treatment. It has also been observed that shrines are open to the travelers and those who don't have families or homes to stay. In addition to it, socio-cultural activities are important functions of shrines. It includes offering prayer (namaz), Aftari in Ramazan, place of interaction of local community, unity in the community and among believers, and cultural activities such as Urs.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that shrines are important aspect of Sufism and performs many functions. It includes spirituality as a mean of psychological satisfaction. Spirituality and shrines are closely linked and religious practices and devotion to shrines is a source relieving stress and anxiety. Spirituality and shrines provide meaning to life of the believers and is associated with peace of mind and satisfaction. Further, shrines perform numerous economic functions (such as source of food for the needy through Langar). Shrines have certain social and cultural functions such as interaction among the local community, the believers, relationship extensions and celebration through Urs etc.

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