



PEOPLE'S PERCEPTION ABOUT THE EFFECT OF SACRED THINGS PLACED AT SUFI SHRINES IN LAHORE, PAKISTAN



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ABSTRACT

Sufism is a system of belief in which Muslims seek spiritual knowledge through direct personal experience of Allah Almighty. It is based upon mystical dimensions of Islam. The shrines are the places where people used to go for satisfying their aspirations that may cover their social, spiritual, economical and psychological aspects of life. Followers of shrines perform different ritual there. The present study used qualitative research technique where by data was conducted from 8 in-depth interviews at Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh's shrine in Lahore. It is purely an empirical research. Findings of the study revealed that most of the people have strong belief upon blessings of Sufis and consider the objects sacred, placed at the Sufi shrines and use them to fulfill their social, psychological, economic and spiritual needs. Perceptions about these objects varied with regard to gender and level of education.

KEY WORDS: *Sufism, aspects of life, rituals, blessings of Sufis, sacred objects*

INTRODUCTION

Sufism is a system of belief in which Muslims seek spiritual knowledge through direct personal experience of Allah Almighty. It is based upon mystical dimensions of Islam. Person who practices the belief system of Sufism is called "Sufi". Emin (2008)

Sufism, which was developed by the twelfth century from a small movement of ascetics emphasized spiritual over the legal, and closeness to, rather than remoteness from Allah (Hatina, 2007). The Sufi traditions and shrines are closely associated (Bashir, 2011) and their relationship is backed into history (Sabra, 2013). In Pakistan Sufi shrines have traditionally been maintained by

hereditary saints (Pirs), who often command a large number of people (Ewing, 1983). Sufi shrines in Pakistan are the common public places of religious rituals which followers consider to be righteous by virtue of being pious (Platteau, 2011). Followers of Sufi s exhibit deep emotional attachment to their shrines (Manzo, 2003). With their emotional fellowship, Sufi shrines remain a significant aspect of religion and social structure in Pakistani society (Farooq & Kiyani, 2012).

Historically, Sufism has been described as a "pathway to God" whereby it helps eliminate all the barriers between man and God through changing patterns of life. Since time immemorial, the tradition of visiting sacred

places to attain religious merit, washing off the sins and accomplishment of desires has been a common practice across the world (Frembgen, 2012). Visiting of sacred spots, places, and building has traditionally been regarded as noble and often equated with purification of body and mind, and achievement of merits (Brewster, 2011). Followers of Sufi shrines engage themselves in different rituals and religious practices (Malik, 1990) which include prayer, attending mosque, Quranic study, Langer (feast), Mannat (divine intercession), Qawwali, Sufiana Kalam, Drumming and Dhamal (ritual trance dance) etc. (Wolf, 2006; Abbas, 2010). Moreover, other religious ritual performed by the people at Sufi shrines are Bayat or having oath in the Pirs, touching the tomb, tasting/licking the salt and other sacred items placed at shines, knotting the thread, offering prayers, blowing and taking round, taking Ta'weez (amulet) (Chaudhary, 2010). These rituals and religious practices provide a structure and meaning to life of the followers (Schrode, 2008).

Hassanali (2010) found that early Sufi writers considered Sufism as the "knowledge of realities" which could not be separated from the knowledge of Islamic law and scriptures. However, conservative Ulmas (religious scholars) criticize such practices and think these rituals as a form of Shirk and Bida' (idolatry) – a best corrupt innovation in Islam (Chaudhary, 2010).

OBJECTIVES

To explore the varied perceptions of visitors about the effect of sacred items placed at Sufi shrines.

METHODS

The present study used Qualitative research design to capture the in-depth opinion of visitors of Sufi Shrines. Data was collected from the shrine of Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh which is situated near Bhatti Gate in Lahore. A qualitative study using a semi-structured interview guide was conducted to measure the perceptions of people about the effect of sacred objects placed at Data Darbar. Shrine of Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh holds the communal loci of followers whereby it attracts thousands of people from Lahore city and rest of the places of Pakistan.

Data was drawn from 8 semi-structured in-depth interviews during the month of August. A set of open ended questions was made in the interview guide and these open ended questions were supported by the topical and motivational probes. Topical probes were not used as separate open or close ended questions instead these were used as sub-themes to further elaborate the major theme. Main themes of the interview guide included fulfillment of physical, economic and spiritual needs, beliefs

and meanings attached to the objects placed at Sufi shrines. The interview guide was prepared in English as well as Urdu. For data collection, interview guide prepared in Urdu was used for convenience and better understanding of the participants. In case of some participants, questions were asked in Punjabi (local language of the province of the Punjab). Interviews conducted in local languages (Urdu and Punjabi) helped capture the intended context of participants' expression. In the present study, saturation point was achieved after conducting 8 in-depth interviews. Participants for the present study were purposively selected from the Sufi shrine of Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh. It was noticed that almost similar number of males and females visited Sufi shrine but there was great tendency of females who had belief on these objects. Place of interview was mutually decided by the participants and the respective researcher. In this regard, on one hand, it was ensured that interview process should not create disturbance for the other followers in performing their rituals. On the other hand, it was also tried that interview should be conducted in such a place or setting where other peoples could not interfere or interrupt the interview. After explaining the objectives of the research, verbal consent was taken from the participants before start of the interview and it was made them believe that during the course of interview, if they feel annoyed or discomforted, they can quit the interview. In this regard, three participants terminated the interview because they were accompanied by their family members and they had to leave for home. Note taking was done in all case after seeking the permission of participants.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was done in steps. At first step, first author transcribed verbatim of the interviews and noted discussion into Urdu for capturing the intended context of participants' expressions. At the second step, she translated Urdu transcripts into English. Both authors analyzed the data manually by initiating the coding and category assignments. They also went through the data identifying discrepancies. All the highlighted discrepancies were discussed and consensus was reached after referring the note taking. At third step, both authors derived themes by analyzing the collected data. It enabled the researchers to capture the context specific perceptions of the participants. Finally, the salient findings of the study were discussed in the light of the themes inferred from the collected data.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Since all shrines in the Pakistan are famous for their authoritative characteristics and different status in the view of their followers. Findings of the study can only be discussed with reference to the shrine of Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh and not to the other shrine(s). The present study was conducted in an unbiased manner because the underlying purpose of the present study was not to challenge or criticize any sect or religious belief system in Pakistan.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

People from different walks of life which included businessmen, government servants, students, daily wagers, factory workers, housewives, and shopkeepers visited Sufi shrine. By and large, views, opinions and arguments of the both genders were similar except views on myths and superstitions. Moreover, a huge difference was found in the opinion of highly educated and illiterate persons with regard to their perceptions about Sufi shrines and different rituals. Overall people visit Sufi shrines for multiple reasons such as for satisfying their spiritual needs, physical and economic needs.

Participants recruited for the present study were aged 20-50 years whereas; the median age of the visitors was 35 years. Visitors of the Sufi shrine had varying degree of education. However, it was found that majority of the people were illiterate, followed by the primary schooling. There was a little number of respondents having higher education. Majority of the respondents belonged to urban background whereas there were few participants who came to visit Sufis shrine outside the Lahore city and they belonged to rural settings.

SOCIAL NEEDS

The major reasons for visiting Sufi shrine included praying for the daughters' marriage, to mitigate the family disputes and for birth of child and other problems. One such woman who was almost 27 years old, and she had completed 10 years of education said,

I have been visiting this Darbar (shrine) for last 5 years. When so ever I had some problem (referring to family issues or financial encumbrances), I just come here and pray for that. Once I borrowed some money from my friend, I was much worried about returning

the money. I came here and prayed for that.

I ate biscuits

as a sacred food stuff (*Tabbaruk*). When I went home my

husband gave me money to return to my friend.

One participant who was 30 years old, belonged to urban area and had completed intermediate said,

My mother and grandmother have been visiting this shrine.

I had no child. I was much worried because my in-laws

criticize me for not having child. My mother brought almond

as sacred food Stuff (*Tabbaruk*) from this shrine. I ate them,

I was surprised after one month I got pregnancy. Now I have

come to distribute almond as *Tabbaruk*.

ECONOMIC GAIN

One of the participants, one male visitor who was 40 years old and belonged to urban area of Lahore shared his success story of economic gains. He elaborated that with the help of Sufi shrine, his business flourished and his economic status was improved. He believed that blessing of the Sufi shrine have helped him economic prosperity, social prestige, and mental peace.

I have been a regular visitor of this shrine for last 10 years.

I was jobless. I had done graduation and I was much upset

about my job. I was almost hopeless one of my friends told

me to pray and keep the rose petals which are placed at

shrine as a *Tabaruk* in your valet. With the blessings of

Sufi, it will increase your earnings. I did the same. I was

surprised I feel progress in my business. Since, I believe

and visiting shrine proved helpful for my business.

PHYSICAL IMPROVEMENT

Findings of the study showed that a majority of participants (5 of 8) visited Sufi shrine for getting rid of illness/disease. They believed that coming to this Sufi shrine, praying here, and eating the sacred food stuff (*Tabaruk*) including Langer, sugar, salt and rose petals

will help them treat diseases. These participants highlighted that by blessings of that Sufi shrine, people get rid of chronic diseases like Hepatitis, Tuberculosis, and Typhoid etc. On probe, it was revealed that the sacred eatable items like salt, sugar, rose petals and Dam Wala Pani (holy verses read on water) have been considered to treat many diseases. One of these participants who was 20 years old girl, an intermediate student stated,

I had allergy on my foot. It started swelling and severe pain.

I couldn't walk. It was colossal problem for me.

My mother brought *Mannat wala Laddu*. I ate that Laddu, by the virtue of this shrine my foot started to recover. Now it is in better position.

Two of the participants said that rose petals placed at shrines help them to treat diseases. One of them said,

My niece was suffering from Typhoid. I brought rose petals from this shrine to my home, made rose water (*gulqand*) and gave it to her. She started to recover and moving towards better health.

A female participant of mid 50s, belonging to urban area near Data Darbar said,

I used to come here every Thursday and place water bottle where all people who use to recite Qur'an, they used to blow on that water. I used to mix that water to all water bottles in my home which protects all my family members from diseases.

A participant who was a house wife, aged 25 years, belonging to rural area said,

I used to come here after my marriage. My daughter was suffering from high fever. I was much tensed about her.

My mother-in-law asked me to bring salt as *Tabbaruk* from Data Darbar. I brought salt from here. As my daughter tasted the salt, by virtue of this shrine she began to recover.

A participant who was a house wife, aged 35 years, belonging to urban area said,

I seldom come here since childhood. Once at the time of my child birth labor pain had not been started since five days. My sister-in-law brought some salt from here. As I tasted the salt I was surprised, labor pain began to start after one hour. I gave birth to a baby boy normally.

CONCLUSION

Most of the people have strong belief upon blessings of Sufis and consider the objects sacred which are placed at the Sufi shrines and use them to fulfill their social and economic needs and for physical improvement. There is more tendencies among women than men to visit shrines. They consider these objects by and large help them in fulfilling their needs and in getting rid of diseases. Peoples were found to be persuaded by different people including parents, relatives, religious leaders, and friends to visit Sufi Shrines. People from almost all walks of life visited shrines but among all visitors the vast majority of people belonged to middle or lower socio-economic status. Perceptions about these objects varied with regard to gender and level of education. It was found that those who believed in superstitions majority were women and uneducated and poor people.

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