



SACRED SPACES: THE ROLE OF SHRINES IN WOMEN'S HEALTH PRACTICE

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Abstract

This research investigates the role of Sufi shrines in addressing the socio-medical concerns of women residing near the Mohra Sharif shrine in Murree, Pakistan. Drawing upon ethnographic methods, the study explores the interplay of cultural beliefs, religious practices, and social factors in shaping women's experiences and perceptions. Key findings reveal that women utilize the shrine for a wide range of issues, including physical illnesses, psychological distress, and social challenges. The study examines the significance of the shrine and its associated saint within the women's belief systems, exploring concepts such as intercession, healing powers, and spiritual guidance.

Furthermore, the research delves into the specific practices employed by women at the shrine, including prayers, recitations, and seeking blessings from the saint. The study also considers the influence of cultural norms, family traditions, and individual experiences on women's decisions to visit the shrine and their expectations of its efficacy. By analysing the interplay of cultural, religious, and social factors, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of women's health-seeking behaviours within the context of Sufi shrines in Pakistan.

Keywords: Sufi Shrines, Women's Health, Socio-medical Problems, Religious Beliefs, Cultural Practices

Introduction

Diversity is prevalent in Pakistan. One can find different cultural patterns from the south to the north. These different cultural patterns call for different approaches towards the same problems. For example, a woman living in the interior Sindh will have to observe different norms from a woman living in the hills of Gilgit-Baltistan. But yet this diversity has an element of unity to some extent, so that, some common features can be found, not always, but in most instances (Rasool, 2024; Levesque, 2022).

One of these elements is religion and mysticism. Reasons for the prevalence of mysticism for spiritual and physical relief are many. But at the moment it is important to acknowledge the popularity of mysticism. Mysticism was a religious trend formed somewhat separately from the orthodox code of religion by interpretation of some religious injunctions. It pointed out a path, and by walking upon that path a person could become elevated.

Since then, many persons have been believed to be mystics having the power to get the prayers answered and solve the problems of the people. The details of mysticism are out of the scope of the present work but it must be known that since then mysticism has found a place in almost the whole of the world, and the Pakistani society is not an exception (Safdar et al., 2023).

It is said that the spread of Islam in the subcontinent owes itself to the toil of these mystics or saints. Therefore, they are considered not only the great men having close relationships with God but also the guardians of Islam. One point that must be cleared here is that societies always have a bend towards adjusting the teaching or practices analogously to the bent of their need. So, whenever this happens a peculiar cultural



pattern emerges. For example, if two identical saints are sent to two different areas, however, they may teach the same, but within their life or after their demise, the socio-economic brush of the society will color their teachings with the colour put upon it by the indigenous people. It is not being said that saints always propagate the same message.

Therefore, the Pakistani society has produced a culture of its own related to the saints and their shrines. It is not a pure one as it has elements of both Islamic mysticism and the regional cultural traditions. But our scope of the study is limited. What is more important here is the cultural status of these saints at present and the relationship of the people with them.

Shrines of the saints are revered, and they are used for the solutions to the problems. Although both genders are involved in these practices, the position of the women is of a special character. These women use these values of mysticism for the solution to their socio-medical problems. These problems are broad in range. They include health problems, family issues, economic matters, etc. Women visit the Shrines and undergo a set of practices to get them solved. Moreover, they build a spiritual connection with the Shrine and the saint. The causal relation is uncertain between the solution of the problem and these cultural norms (Safdar et al., 2023).

What is more astonishing is the prevalence of these practices: the question arises that how they get satisfaction from it and how they psychologically stay assured of the help. Reports have been there that social and medical problems are solved by going to Shrines. Therefore, it is attractive to explore the cultural pattern that builds these perceptions. The origin of these perceptions ends up in psychological satisfaction. It also brings changes in physical orientation, therefore, leading to the solution of the problems. As it has been said earlier that the causal relation is uncertain, the factors that bring up these changes are important.

The cultural grooming of the women is important in this respect. Although these practices are considered superstitious, it has been observed that the perceptions play an important role in the social status of these practices. And this problem has not only been observed in the so-called backward societies but also they continue their existence in advanced areas of Pakistan. In many urban areas, these practices are performed side by side with modern measures. It shows the mental orientation as well as the cultural importance of these practices.

Another important aspect here is the historicism's point of view that societies develop the mechanisms for the explanation and smooth running of the system. These practices related to the Shrines reflect the nature of the society and its trends. These different practices form an essential part of Pakistani society. The reason for their importance cannot be hypothesized here. They should be explored through sociological methods.

These practices performed by the women are like a cog in the great machine: it runs by the assemblage of different parts. The cultural mechanisms behind the functioning of these cogs call for research. It will lead to testing the validity of some of the important hypotheses in the functionalist paradigm.

Definition of the Key Terms

Geertz (2013), a renowned anthropologist, defined religion in his book as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic". This definition highlights the symbolic and cultural significance of religion.

Durkheim (2016) defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them".

The theologian Paul Tillich (2012) defined religion as "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary, and in itself provides the answer to the question of the meaning of our existence". This definition emphasizes the existential and personal dimensions of religious experience.



The faith is strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof. Therefore, the practices based over faith may include actual or superficial solution of the problems, or psychological satisfaction at least, but causal relationship is not necessary. In mystical religious practices shrines form an integral part.

In this study the religion is defined as “Religion is a system of shared symbols and beliefs that establishes a framework for understanding the meaning and purpose of existence, unites individuals into a moral community through shared rituals and practices, and engages individuals in a search for the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, often involving the sacred and the profane”.

Standard Oxford dictionary defines a shrine as: “a place regarded as holy because of its associations with a divinity or a sacred person or relic, marked by a building or other construction.”

Saint can be defined as: “a person acknowledged as holy or virtuous and regarded as a mediator between god and human spiritually”.

Merriam-Webster defines socio-medical as “socio-medical is something relating to the interrelations of medicine and social welfare”. Broadly speaking, the term socio-medical problems relates to the medical problems and their relationship with the social environment. That how a disease is perceived socially, how it is constructed socially, and solved are the primary concern of socio-medical inquiry.

Shrines of Sufi saints are an important part of the Pakistani culture. They can be found in almost every city. They not only manifest the religious values of the people but also shape them continuously by acting as symbols. Their value is also functional. They have become part of the society in such a way that they serve as religious institution with system of their own. Their importance can be observed by visiting a shrine; and such a visit would also reveal their particular importance for women.

Lives of women in Pakistan are abound by problems; physical, social and psychological. In such a society where ways of relief are less shrines perform various functions for them. They visit shrines for various reasons from solution of their family problems to spiritual relief. Therefore, importance of shrine cannot be exaggerated in realm of women.

Shrines lie within an Islamic spiritual tradition called Sufism and mysticism.

Statement of the Problem

Women living around the shrine Mohra Sharif near Murree go to the shrine and pray for the solution of their socio-medical problems. These problems are of a wide range. The problem is that how these women perceive the mysticism and particularly, the saint. Moreover, how they get the satisfaction that their problems have been solved. Exploration of their perceptions is necessary.

These perception lead to the faith based practices. These practices are believed to solve and heal. There is difference in Sufi orders and therefore, in their worldview. The worldview then makes the perception. But these also prevails a similarity. These perceptions have historical, causal and cultural dimensions in them.

Historical include the arrival of the saint and development of his relationship with the community. Moreover, the causes of the development of this spiritual trend of observance of special practices among the women. Causal include the nature of the problems; that how problems arise and how women arrive at the Mazar, and thereby get their solutions. Moreover, what are the causal relationships involved. Cultural dimension includes the cultural pattern that promotes such practices. These include the role of the culture in building up these perceptions and psychological orientation.

Objectives

The present study is confined with ritual use of Shrine and mysticism among the women living around the shrine Mohra Sharif, Kashmiri bazaar, Murree. The objective of the present study will be:

- 1) To study traditional and faith-based perceptions of the women about the saint.
- 2) To find out the nature of social-medical problems.
- 3) To explore the use of Shrine and mysticism by for the solution of the socio-medical problems.

Literature Review

Pakistan's land is full of hundreds of shrines, in big cities as well as in small villages, scattered in the



whole country where linkages between Sufism and the places of worship of different holy people and Sufi run deep (Abbas et al., 2020). Many are unknown to the majority of the people, serving as sites of worshipers, while some are prominent on national level.

The Shrines inhabit a vital position in the cultural and social as well as religious and culture life of rituals, Saints, traditional belief, sounds, trance, dance, music in ethnic healing, and spiritual illness/disease. It is not only a place of belief and devotion based on Sufi shrines but a place where Muslims and non-Muslim take part in happiness activities together. The design and architecture of the Sufi Shrines have local as well as worldwide influences, representative spiritual, belief systems, economic, and aesthetic dimensions of Muslim social institute. Therefore, Muslims' association with the Sufi Shrines has much importance from traditional, political, social and economic perspectives (Iqbal & Farid, 2017). Cantered on an ethnographic illustration, this research aims to highlight the use of Sufi Shrines space and Peoples' Perceptions about Visiting Sufi shrines in the ethnic perspective of rural and urban Sindh. In addition to discuss the socio spatial interactions about the Sufi shrines, this study has discovered that majority of the people and visitors have strong belief systems upon the blessings of Sufis and they visit shrines to fulfil their social, economic, physical, mental and spiritual wishes (Charan et al., 2018; Charan et al., 2024).

These shrines occupy a central place in the cultural and social fabric of Pakistani society, intertwining religious practices with rituals, music, dance, and traditional beliefs. They serve as spaces for spiritual healing, transcendence, and community engagement, often transcending religious boundaries as both Muslims and non-Muslims participate in celebratory events (Pirani, 2009; Takano & Taoka, 2024). The architectural styles of these shrines exhibit a diverse range of influences, reflecting local traditions, global inspirations, and the multifaceted dimensions of Muslim social life, encompassing spiritual beliefs, economic realities, and aesthetic values. Consequently, the relationship between Muslims and Sufi shrines holds profound significance in the social, political, economic, and cultural spheres of Pakistani society.

This research, grounded in ethnographic observations, aims to investigate the utilization of Sufi shrine spaces and the perceptions of visitors, particularly focusing on the experiences of individuals from both rural and urban Sindh. The study revealed that a substantial majority of visitors harbour strong faith in the blessings of Sufi saints and seek their intercession to fulfil a wide range of desires, including social, economic, physical, mental, and spiritual aspirations (Qureshi, 2010).

Recognizing the significant influence of shrines and Sufi figures within Pakistani society, this research specifically explores the motivations and practices of female visitors. The study was conducted at the shrine of Syed Sakhi Mehboob Baadshah in Islamabad's G/6 sector, where a purposive sample of 12 female respondents was selected. Employing primarily qualitative research methods, the study uncovered diverse protocols observed by women during their visits. While individuals from all socioeconomic backgrounds visit the shrine, the findings suggest that individuals from lower socioeconomic strata may prioritize the fulfilment of material desires, while those with higher levels of education may place greater emphasis on inner peace and spiritual fulfilment. Shrines and Sufis have been influential elements immersed in the structure of Pakistani society. They are constructive in shaping many rituals and practices that are carried out. The results showed different protocols performed by women and also all socio-economic strata's visit shrine but majority of the population belongs to lower class that are more focused towards fulfilment of their desires and the educated people have a preference towards inner satisfaction and formal attendance.

Research methodology

This research was qualitative research. In doing research I used many tools. These tools were used to collect data according to my objectives. All tools and the ways in which these were used are mentioned in next sections.

Tools

I used following tools for data collection. These tools were useful and feasible in research locale.

Rapport Building. Rapport building is the most fundamental tool for doing any research in sociology. The concept of rapport means that there should be such a relationship which is based on mutual trust and



understanding. In sociology it means that if there is rapport between the researcher and the respondents than it would be possible to get such data from respondents which is closer to actual understanding and culture of the respondents. Rapport building is the process of building rapport.

Participant observation. Participant observation is different from one another. In participant observation we not only observe research participants but also engage in their activities.

Key Informant. It is important source of information in sociological research. They are the people who have more information about their cultures than other people. They also enable a researcher to enter a cultural group.

Purposive Sampling. It is a sampling technique in which a researcher selects samples based on his prior knowledge (Campbell et al., 2020). She selects such samples that meet the purpose of research. This sampling involves judgment on part of the researcher. I used this technique in my research because my research was related to socio-medical issues of the women.

Snowball Sampling. In snowball sampling a researcher uses recommendations to find out the people who are relevant to research and are useful (Parker et al., 2019).

In-Depth Interviews. An interview is a way of interacting or communicating with people which is face to face. There are different types of interviews but I used in-depth interviews more frequently during my research.

Secondary Data. The secondary data has been obtained from relevant reports, websites, journals, newspapers as well as books in libraries.

Area of Study. In every sociological research, a researcher has to ascertain a place to study the culture of that place. After choosing a locale for study, a researcher proceeds towards further research. For this study the locale of research was in a village in Murree known as Kashmiri Bazar. In that area is situated a famous shrine which is a focus of attention for a long period of time. That shrine was the site of study. Its name is shrine Mohra Sharif.

Location of Murree longitude and latitude. This place is situated in Abbottabad, N.W.F.P., Pakistan, its geographical coordinates are 33° 54' 0" North, 73° 24' 0" East and its original name (with diacritics) is Murree.

Site of Study. Site of study was a shrine called Mohra sharif which is a spiritual center of a sufi order called Nisbat e Rasooli which is just another name of the Naqshbandiyah order.

Perceptions and Reasons for Coming to the Shrine

Women who come to the shrine do not always make decisions for themselves. There are many factors that play role in this decision. Along with that, the perceptions of the women is constructed by social factors. Their perceptions are the main source of inspiration for resorting to the shrine for solution of their problems. These women visit the shrine for many reason which are very diverse.

The ways of coming into interaction with Shrine

Decision-making model explains that why do women choose shrines for solution of their problems. There are a variety of options available to women to solve their problems. They can for example, visit a doctor for their disease, consult family for marital problems, go to homeopathic doctors and come to shrines. The women who choose to come to shrine choose for various reasons which can be explored. Some women resort only to faith based practices while other women perform more than one activity at a time. The decision to come at the shrine, as explored during interviews, was influenced by following reasons.

Childhood rearing

The women coming to the shrine in some cases are groomed by the families having old connection with the shrine. They find the shrine and the saint as part of their family culture. Such women then automatically become devotees and visitors of the shrine. Many respondents told that they have been coming here since childhood. Once they were brought here by their family, now they come here on their own. One respondent told that "my mother tells me that when I was born I was brought to the shrine because I was sick. Then I became healthy."



These women consequently rear their children in the same way. And the chain keeps building itself.

Individual Decision

Some women decide on their own to come to the shrine. These are women who do not have any previous knowledge of the saint or the shrine. They come to the shrine when they know it through some source. Many women who were independent in their all matters told that coming to the shrine was their individual decision.

These women can come here with or without any specific reason. Some of them just believe in Sufism. They arrive here to build a connection with the religion.

Mothers of Women

Mothers of the women play an important role in their decision making. Young girls are guided by their mothers to come to the shrine.

When other methods are not working

It is not necessary that all methods work for solution of the problems faced by women. Many medical conditions and social problems stay unresolved even after spending a good amount of time and money on them.

Peer Group

Women have communication networks with other women. These women tell them stories of their experiences. In this way experiences and with them modes of these experiences are propagated in a culture.

Socioeconomic Status

Economic means often determine the nature and variety of solutions available to women. It has been observed that women from lower socio-economic strata visit the shrine more often for solution of their problems.

Perception about the Shrine and the Saint

Nisbat e Rasool

For all Muslims the personality of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) is very important. For them it is obligatory to follow him in all affairs of their life. His teaching is seen as a virtue that would bring a good life in this world and in the world hereafter.

A Centre of healing

Shifa or healing powers are said to be in possession of the saint. It is believed by the women that their diseases which cannot be cured in hospitals, can be treated here through prayer.

Spiritual Status of the saint

Having link with the Holy Prophet (PBUH) gives a special status to a person, so it is believed. This status does not come without exercises into region. The father if the current saint is seen as a figure who had great spiritual qualities.

Intercession

With spiritual status is associated a special quality which is thought as being possessed by the current saint and his father. This quality is of (*shafa'at*) or intercession.

Reasons for visiting the Shrine

There are various reasons for which the women visit the shrine.

Medical Problems

Women having various kinds of medical problems visit the shrine. These can be divided between major disease and minor diseases. The women having major disease include women with cancer, cardiac issues, respiratory problems, diseases caused by serious kinds of viruses. There is also difference in the periods for which the women have been visiting the shrines. Some of these had come here for the first. For some there have been years with disease, and years in visiting the shrine.

Psychological Problems

Women face many psychological problems which face negligence. Most often the serious psychological problems are explained in terms of religion. The local culture of women also contributes to these interpretations. For example, in most of the cases that are faced by the women when they achieve puberty, the



anxiety and depression of that stage is seen as possession by spirits. Therefore, the women come to shrine for solution of these problems.

Practices at the shrine

The women who visit the shrine perform various kinds of activities there. Some of these activities are part of the code of the shrine, others are performed by women on their own and have become a part of the culture of the shrine. There are same activities for most of problems. But some activities or practices are performed for special or serious problems. These activities revolve around one principle: reverence for the saint due to recognition of his spiritual status. The element of respect and love is apparent in all activities.

Spending Three Nights at the Shrine

Some women face very serious problems like a chronic disease or some other problem causing a lot of suffering for them. One way of solving such problems is spending three nights at the shrine. These women do recitations of different kinds and take part in service of the shrine. For them spending some time in service of the shrine can offset misfortune. It can also bring fortune for them.

Meeting the Saint

Women flock to this place in urgency of their needs, anxieties of their sufferings and devotion of their love. For all these women, the time of greatest importance come when the gate of the current saint's place is opened in asr (two hours before sunset). They go in with their anxieties and come back with a support to their grievances. The saint becomes a man who can assure them that their sufferings will end, or at least bring some rewards for them at some time.

Amulet

One thing that the saint gives to women is an amulet. They is only one amulet given to all women. Some women are told to keep this amulet with them every time. Others are asked to put it in water and then drink water. There is also not any difference between the amulet given for medical conditions and social problems. Women take this amulet with great respect.

Azkar

Azkars or recitations are important part of the rituals in Sufism- and Islam in general. Islamic scholars emphasize that Quranic verses can be used for different purposes.

At this shrine, women spend a good amount of time reciting Quran. Some women even spend whole day reciting Quran. Excluding Quranic verses, other azkars are also prescribed. These azkars are thought to have different effects. The purpose of a zikr or its supposed effect can be judged from its content. Some azkars include name of God which relate to specific problem. For example, a zikr having name of the God 'razik' of sustainer, is enchanted for solution of economic problems. Similarly, a zikr having name of God, Al Shafi (curer) is enchanted for solution of medical problems.

The most important practice done by the women at the shrine is recitation of different verses of Quran for different purposes. Other azkars include:

Haq Hoo

It is a special zikr which is chanted and recited every time by men and women at the shrine. Women report that this zikr (recitation) takes them into another realm. They find satisfaction in the passion that it generates. One woman told that: "This zikr gives me energy. I feel elevated. I think that this world is nothing. If there is anything true that is the God. This zikr is thought to have special effects. It is a very strong zikr which brings blessings from the God. "This zikr is very close to God," said one woman when asked about why she recites it.

Khatam e Khwajgan

This is a special khatam which is to be recited by a murid in presence of the saint, it is, however, recited also in absence of the saint. Its recitation is seen as extremely beneficial in the Naqshabandia order. It can be recited daily. But it is more often recited once in a week.

Conclusion

This study has explored the multifaceted role of Sufi shrines in addressing the socio-medical concerns



of women residing near the Mohra Sharif shrine in Murree, Pakistan. The findings reveal a complex interplay of cultural beliefs, religious practices, and social factors that shape women's experiences and perceptions.

The shrine serves as a significant centre of spiritual and social life for the community. Women visit the shrine seeking solutions to a wide range of problems, including physical illnesses, psychological distress, and social challenges. The belief in the saint's intercession and healing powers plays a crucial role in their decision to seek solace and support at the shrine, aligning with findings from other studies on the role of religious belief in health-seeking behaviours (Charan et al., 2024; Kleinman, 1980; Good, 1994; Webster, 2021; Zvingowanisei, 2024). Now a days, there this spiritual relief is also available on different social media websites all over the world as well (Asif & Sandhu, 2023).

The study highlights the diverse range of practices employed by women at the shrine, including prayers, recitations, and seeking blessings from the saint. These practices are often intertwined with cultural traditions and family histories, reflecting the deep-rooted significance of the shrine within the community. This observation resonates with anthropological studies on the role of religion in shaping social and cultural practices (Arshad et al., 2024; Evans-Pritchard, 1956; Geertz, 1973).

While this research provides valuable insights into the role of Sufi shrines in women's lives, further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of these practices on women's well-being. Investigating the interplay between traditional beliefs and modern healthcare systems is also crucial for understanding the complexities of women's health-seeking behaviours in contemporary Pakistan. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on the intersection of religion, health, and gender (Butler, 1990; Harding, 1986; Ranganathan, 2023).

Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of recognizing and understanding the diverse ways in which individuals seek meaning, healing, and support within their communities. By acknowledging the significance of cultural and religious beliefs, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of women's health experiences and develop more holistic approaches to healthcare.

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