

## **Prevalence of Superstitions and other Supernaturals in Rural Punjab: A Sociological Perspective**

**Ayesha Farooq**

*Government College University*

**Ashraf K. Kayani**

*University of the Punjab*

### **ABSTRACT**

The present paper is designed to explore the belief system prevailing in a rural community of the Punjab, Pakistan. In particular, prevalence of beliefs regarding superstitions, dreams and shrines are studied along with other supernatural aspects such as black magic, *taweez* and ghosts. Data are taken from a probability sample survey conducted in the village. The survey covered various aspects of social structure including superstitions and supernaturals. Half of the respondents are male and the other half females. Our analysis shows that sizable proportion of the people believe in various superstitions, meaningful dreams and supernatural aspects such as black magic, *taweez* and ghosts. Major reasons for believing in these are the stated personal experiences or observations. Visiting shrines of the saints is also common among the villagers mainly due to dedication or traditions.

**KEY WORDS:** Beliefs, superstitions, dreams, shrines, black magic, ghosts

### **Introduction**

This paper focuses on belief system prevailing in a Pakistani Punjabi village (Mohla). It comprises of description of beliefs in superstitions, dreams and visiting shrines. It also includes various other supernatural aspects such as black magic, *taweez* and ghosts. Reasons for having belief in the specific supernatural aspects are also described. Sociologists such as Sturzo (1942) emphasized that sociological study should include supernatural aspects as a living reality to develop social laws and describing social structures. Generally, the concept supernatural refers to something unusual and extraordinary. One might not scientifically prove incidences of supernaturals, however, it does not imply that these experiences are impossible (Miles, 1966).

Belief system as part of social structures has its own sociological implications. Belief system is part of subjective culture that is usually imparted in human consciousness through mass media, cultural artifacts and educational institutions (Kelly and Ronan, 1987). They further mention that variations are there in the subjective experiences of these cultural aspects which are due to differences of individual's roles and positions. Beliefs and attitudes are socially learned (Bord and Faulkner, 1975). They state that change in the beliefs about God is less likely to occur than other social and political aspects. Family and community members have also significant influence in learning of various beliefs. These are primary sources of transferring the social and cultural aspects including beliefs.

Regional and gender differences may be found in belief system. Generally, it is assumed that rural population is more superstitious than urban. Contrary to general notion, a study of students in an Indian university has found that urban people are more superstitious than those having rural background (George and Sreedhar, 2006). It is also observed that positive superstitions are endorsed more than negative ones (Wiseman and Watt 2004). Interpretation of dreams also has social context and symbolic significance. Some dreams are symbolic expressions of everyday experiences (Stickgold et al., 2001). However, Hall (1979) believes that dreams go beyond the limits of ordinary perceptions and logics. Islamic tradition is also rich of significance and interpretation of dreams such as those of Prophet Mohammad (P.B.U.H) and Prophet Yusuf (Green 2003).

Sociological dimension of mythology shows that it supports certain social order which vary from place to place (Campbell, 1998). For instance, Punjab is considered rich in sufism (Frembgen, 2004). People visit shrines for various purposes such as cure for illness, birth of child and financial problems (Kurin, 1983). Many families visit shrines due to dedication and their traditional orientation towards sufism. Tradition of sufism is a force which reflects that such spiritual resources in Islam provide coping strategy for various issues of the contemporary world (Voll, 1992).

Generally, village community is perceived traditional and fatalistic in nature having strong belief system. Prevalence of some superstitions, therefore, is quite understandable. Sjoberg and Wahlberg (2002) state that if some acts get intermittent reinforcement that is likely to lead a person's behavior in the same way. To them, at times, these principles pertain foremost to behavior and not just beliefs. Some of these cultural patterns are termed superstitions. These are behavioral patterns which affect course of activities, whether we practice them or not but we recognize them (Jandt, 2004). A study by Stanke (2004) suggests that even some paranormal beliefs are associated with strong religious beliefs.

In Pakistan, majority of population is Muslim. All the villagers under study follow Islam. Generally, Islamic ideology does not support superstitious beliefs. However, there are superstitions that prevail in the community due to cultural traditions. Besides, questions are asked regarding various aspects of belief system. These include belief in dreams, ghosts, *sufi* shrines, black magic etc.

## Methodology

A sample survey was conducted covering various structural aspects of the village. It also includes the prevalence of belief of the villagers regarding superstitions and other supernatural aspects. Household enumeration was carried out to assess the total number of households and other relevant information. Total number of households was found to be 350.

Respondents of the present study were of age 55 and above. This elderly age group was selected in particular as they might have observed or experienced the supernatural aspects in their life time. Out of 350 households and 223 eligible persons, 109 respondents were randomly selected resulting in 54 male and 55 female respondents. An interview schedule permitting multiple responses was constructed. Our findings are based on descriptive analyses.

## Belief in Superstitions

Superstitions generally refer to having belief that certain things and incidences have positive or negative implications. For instance, certain color, day and numbers are perceived lucky or unlucky in some societies. These beliefs may impact social life of people by influencing their behavior. Believing in superstitions is a universal phenomenon. Type and degree of beliefs may vary in different regions and cultures.

In the present study of the village community, slightly less than one-half of the respondents stated to have belief in various superstitions. The other half of them does not believe that such things have any power to influence their lives. Percentages of the respondents stating various superstitions by gender are shown in Table 1. Almost equal number of male and female respondents state that they believe in superstitions.

**Table 1:**  
**Percentages of the Respondents Stating Various Superstitions by Gender, Mohla 2008**

SUPERSTITIONS	RESPONDENTS' GENDER		
	Male	Female	Total
Breaking of Mirror	8.3	7.4	7.8
Seeing Black Cat	8.3	3.7	5.9
Lucky Day	45.8	33.3	39.2
Unlucky Day	41.7	44.4	43.1
Sacred Object	37.5	33.3	35.3

Lucky Color	20.8	14.8	17.6
Unlucky Color	20.8	11.1	15.7
Sweeping Floor at Sunset	41.7	63.0	53.0
Crow Sitting on Wall	45.8	77.8	62.7
Itchy Palm Brings Money	25.0	33.3	29.4
N	24	27	51
Average No. of Responses	3.0	3.2	3.1

**\*Multiple responses were permissible. Sum total of percentages may exceed 100.0**

**\*\*Only those respondents were asked about various types of superstitions who believed in superstitions**

Of those who believe in superstitions, most of them consider certain days as lucky. For instance, Thursday and Friday are generally considered lucky probably due to the religious significance. Substantial proportion of these respondents also states that some days are not lucky such as Tuesday. Villagers prefer to travel, start new project or make celebration on lucky days. While they avoid these things on days which are considered unlucky as it is assumed to bring bad luck or omen. More females than males believe that sweeping floor at sunset brings negative implications for the household members. Similarly, less males than females believe that crow sitting on the wall of the house means that some guest will come on that particular day. Plausible reason for the gender difference may be that women are more concerned with household work than men.

About one-third of the respondents also believe that having a sacred object such as a verse from holy Quran keeps them safe from evil spirits. Some colors are also mentioned as lucky or unlucky by a small proportion of the respondents. Lucky and unlucky colors are generally green and black respectively. There are rare instances of superstitions including breaking of mirror and crossing black cat before or in the beginning of travel bring bad luck. Wiseman and Watt (2004) also observe that positive superstitions are generally endorsed more than the negative ones. Over one-fourth of these respondents also believe that an itchy palm brings money. On the average, about one response is given by males and about two responses by females. This shows that overall females believe more in superstitions as compared to the males. Similarly, George and Sreedhar (2006) in their study of an Indian community conclude that women have more superstitious beliefs than men.

### Reasons for Believing in Superstitions

Respondents are asked to state reasons for believing in the superstitions. Table 2 shows that one- half of the male respondents who believe in various superstitions equally emphasize experience and observation among the reasons. On the other

hand, majority of the females (about 70.0%) believe in superstitions on the basis of self experience. More males than females state observation as a reason for believing in superstitions. Females are perhaps considered more fatalistic and superstitious than males.

**Table 2:**  
**Percentages of the Respondents Stating Reasons for Believing in Superstitions by Gender, Mohla 2008**

Reasons For Believing In Superstitions*	RESPONDENTS' GENDER		
	Male	Female	Total
Experience	50.0	70.4	60.8
Observation /Tradition	50.0	22.2	35.3
Religion	29.2	29.6	29.4
N	24	27	51
Average No. of Responses	1.3	1.2	1.3

\*Multiple responses were permissible. Sum total of percentages may exceed 100.0

\*\*Only respondents stating belief in superstitions were asked about reasons for believing in them

Over one-fourth of the respondents also states religion among the reasons for believing in some superstition. Stanke (2004) also concludes in her study of superstitions that strong religious belief is also associated with other forms of paranormal beliefs. Religious beliefs are mostly associated with superstitions such as keeping a sacred object, lucky days etc.

## Belief in Dreams

Generally, there are three basic types of dreams. Firstly, dreams that are reflection of our routine matters and experiences. These dream elements often emerge from memories of waking events (Stickgold et al., 2001). To them, emotions may play central role in the process of dreaming. The second type of dreams is based on the pleasant and unpleasant experiences of the past that are retained in subconscious mind. Third type is the one in which some unimaginable or unforeseen incidence is visualized. These dreams are considered to transcend the limitations of ordinary perception and customary logic (Hall, 1979). These might be associated with some prediction of future event or symbolic indication from supernatural or divine force.

The third type primarily is related to our question on dreams. Green (2003) states that Islamic tradition is rich in symbolic expressions and interpretations of dreams. The researcher elaborates that it was dreams and subsequent visions of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) that announced the beginning of Islam. Prophet Yusuf was also known for true interpretation of dreams. Overall, one-half of the respondents believe that dreams are meaningful whereas the other half does not.

Table 3 shows that of those who believe in dreams, a vast majority of the respondents believe due to their personal experiences. Higher proportion of females than males believe that some dreams are meaningful on the basis of self experience.

**Table 3:**  
**Percentage Distribution of the Respondents Stating Reasons for Believing in Dreams by Gender, Mohla 2008**

Reasons For Believing In Dreams*	RESPONDENTS' GENDER		
	Male	Female	Total
Experience	63.6	87.5	77.8
Observation/Tradition	13.6	3.1	7.4
Religious	22.7	9.4	14.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>54</b>

**\*Only respondents stating dreams are meaningful were asked about reasons for believing**

Higher proportion of males than females mention observation and religion among the reasons for their belief. On the other hand, more females than males state personal experience as a reason for believing in dreams. As mentioned earlier, fatalistic approach of women may be among the plausible reasons. Overall, over three-fourth (78.0%) of the respondents believe due to their experience. Religious belief and observation are less significant reasons for believing in dreams.

## Visiting Shrines

Shrines of sufi saints remain the significant aspect of religion and social structure of Pakistan. In rural areas of Pakistan many tribes are associated with particular saint who originally converted that tribe to Islam (Ewing, 1983). Functions of shrines include social participation, provision of entertainment in the form of devotional music and songs (*qawali*), educating people, distribution of food, sweets, money etc. (Kurin, 1983).

Respondents are asked whether they visit shrines and purpose of their visits to the shrines. Percentages of the respondents stating purpose for visiting shrines by gender are shown in Table 4. Overwhelming majority (89.0%) visit shrines of sufi saints for various purposes. Of those who visit shrines, nearly one-half of them are males and the other half females.

Some of the villagers enjoy being at the shrine and derive peace of mind. One gets satisfaction for some unresolved inner conflict is another common reason

found in the study. Our study also shows that majority of both the genders visit shrines due to their dedication and respect for the sufi saint. They have learned the tradition from their forefathers and find contentment in it.

**Table 4:**  
**Percentages of the Respondents Stating Reasons for Visiting Shrines, by Gender, Mohla2008.**

Purpose Of Visiting Shrines*	Respondents' Gender		
	Male	Female	Total
Dedication/Tradition	91.5	84.0	87.6
Mannat	8.5	20.0	14.4
Peace of Mind/Entertainment	10.6	18.0	14.4
n	47	50	97
Average No. of Responses	1.1	1.2	1.2

\* Multiple responses were permissible that may result in sum total percentage exceeding 100.0

\*\*Only respondents stating that they visit shrines were asked about purpose of visits

More females than males go to shrines for *mannats* and getting peace of mind. *Mannat* refers to prayer with a condition attached to it. When the wish is fulfilled then the person gives charity (food, money etc.) in the name of the sufi saint. *Mannat* may be asked for various purposes including marriages, cure of illness, having a child, dissolution of property dispute, passing exams etc.

### Belief in Supernatural Aspects

In this study, supernatural aspects include black magic, *taweez* and ghosts. Respondents are asked about their belief in the supernatural aspects. Such beliefs are considered to have positive and negative implications on the lives of people. Over three-fourth of the respondent have belief in supernatural aspects (Table 5). Of these respondents, equal proportion of males and females believe in various supernatural aspects. The table shows that a vast majority of these respondents believe in black magic (81.0%). Generally, it is considered to have negative impact on the lives of people.

**Table 5:**  
**Percentages of the Respondents Stating their Belief in Various Supernatural Aspects, by Gender, Mohla 2008**

Supernatural Aspects	RESPONDENTS' GENDER		
	Male	Female	Total
Black Magic	85.7	76.2	81.0
<i>Taweez</i>	100.0	95.2	97.6
Ghosts ( <i>Jin</i> )	95.2	90.5	92.9
N	42	42	84
Average No. of Responses	2.8	2.6	2.7

\* Multiple responses were permissible that may result in sum total percentage exceeding 100.0

Overwhelming majority of the respondents (about 93.0%) also believes in ghosts. Similarly, almost all the respondents take *taweez* from *pir* or some other spiritual/religious personality for various purposes. *Pir* refers to a religious guide having spiritual power. *Taweez* generally refers to *Quranic* verses written on a piece of paper and folded in some metal or leather covering. These are generally worn by a person. Some *taweez* are also drinkable and eatable as instructed by the *Pir*. It is generally believed to prevent evil spirits. There is no significant gender difference regarding belief in supernatural aspects.

Percentages of the respondents stating purpose for taking *taweez* by gender are shown in Table 6. It shows that more females than males (about 88.0% and 67.0% respectively) take *taweez* for cure of illness of some family member. It may indicate that females are more concerned about the health of household members as compared to males.

**Table 6**  
**Percentages of the Respondents Stating Purpose for Taking Taweez, by Gender, Mohla 2008**

Purpose For Taking Taweez *	RESPONDENTS' GENDER		
	Male	Female	Total
Cure of animal illness	61.9	30.0	46.3
Marriage	23.8	2.5	13.4
Cure of human illness	66.7	87.5	76.8
Others (Exams)	7.1	5.0	6.1
n	42	40	82
Average No. of Responses	1.6	1.3	1.4

\* Multiple responses were permissible. Sum total of percentages may exceed 100.0

\*Only respondents stating that they take *taweez* were asked about the purposes

On the other hand, proportion of males are twice as much as of females who take *taweez* for cure of animal illness. Plausible reasons may be that generally men look after animals and are involved in cattle raising as part of their work. About one-fourth of the male respondents also take *taweez* for getting married with girl of their choice. Hardly any female respondents take *taweez* for marriage. Rarely, *taweez* is taken for other purposes such as passing exams etc.

Reasons for believing in supernatural aspects are also assessed in the present study. Table 7 shows that over one-half of the respondents believe in supernatural aspects due to their experiences. One-third of these respondents states observation and tradition among the reasons for their belief. Over one-fourth of them also believe in supernatural phenomenon due to religious reason. For instance, ghosts and black magic are mentioned in the holy book (*Quran*) of Muslims.

**Table 7**  
**Percentages of the Respondents Stating Reasons for Believing in Supernatural Aspects by Gender, Mohla 2008**

Reason for Having Belief in Supernatural Aspects	RESPONDENTS' GENDER		
	Male	Female	Total
Experience	51.2	60.5	56.0
Observation/Tradition	29.3	37.2	33.3
Religious	29.3	27.9	28.6
n	41	43	84
Average No. of Responses	1.1	1.3	1.2

\* Multiple responses were permissible. Sum total of percentages may exceed 100.0

\*\*Only respondents stating belief in supernatural aspects were asked about reasons for their belief

### Major Findings and Conclusion

Analysis of belief system shows that half of the villagers believe in various superstitions. Among these superstitions, the most popular are crow sitting on wall, sweeping floor at sunset, lucky and unlucky days. These superstitions are largely believed due to the claimed self experiences of the respondents. Similarly, one- half of them believes in dreams and associates it with their personal experiences. Overwhelming majority visits shrines of saints out of dedication and tradition. Belief in various supernatural aspects is also widely acknowledged. Almost all believe in *taweez* and ghosts. *Taweez* are mostly believed to cure human and animal illnesses respectively.

Black magic is also believed by a vast majority due to their experiences. Observations of happenings and black magic being mentioned in religion are among the other reasons for believing in its supernatural aspects. It is assumed that

superstitious beliefs may decline in the following years and perhaps will be substituted by new ones. Probably, media will play significant role in adopting new superstitions as influenced by other cultures. It is also expected that beliefs that are backed by religious ideology will remain the same such as black magic, *taweez*, ghosts and dreams.

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## Biographical Note

**Ayesha Farooq** is Lecturer of Sociology at Government College University, Lahore-Pakistan

**Prof. Dr. Ashraf K. Kayani** is HEC Professor at Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore-Pakistan