
Sufism: Practices at Sufi Shrines in Punjab: (A Case Study of Baba Lasoori Shah, Lyallpur)

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The culture of the Sufi Shrines marks the special features of the Punjabi culture. This culture dominates the thoughts of the scholars with suspicion that Sufi Shrines are the hub of the religious and spiritual activities or the cultural dominance. With the expansion of Islam as religion over Asian and African continents, the Sufi orders were emerged with different religious and academic discussions. There is no blinking fact that this diversity expressed itself in various cultural expressions also, referred to as “Islamicate” by Marshal Hodgson in his famous treatise *The Venture of Islam*. South Asia embraced many orders of Sufism during medieval period and these orders mutually differ in many practices. Secondly religious and Sufi practices, sometimes, differ within an order. Muhammad Baksh known as Baba Lasoori Shah housed in Lyallpur and attracted native people due to his esoteric qualities. He used to live under a shady tree and followers ascribed him the name Lasoori Shah due to the symbol of tree and his silence. After his death, his shrine became the center of religious and cultural activities. It is situated in Jhang bazaar Lyallpur. This paper is a case study of the shrine of Baba Loosri Shah based on the overall assumption that people practice religion according to the teachings of religion Islam or according to their socio-cultural requirements. This research aims at answering following questions: What are the factors that distinguish the shrine of Baba Loosri Shah from other shrines due to rituals that are performed there? The study also focuses the forms and rituals of the religious festivals, diversity and response of the people to these festivals. The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. Primary and secondary sources have been consulted for data collection and interpretation.

Introduction

Lyallpur is a major city of central Punjab that is known due to industry and industrial products which are exported to the whole world. It is a city of wealthy persons, educated middle class and the poor labor class. Wealthy persons are Ashraaf of this city which include businessmen, politicians and bureaucrats. Educated middle class consist of those persons who came here for studies and settled here. The poor labor class is called Ajlaaf that consist of marginal class. Ashraaf often visit the shrines for barakat and contribute in langar for blessings. Educated middle class visit shrines but as routine matter. The Ajlaaf are in great majority and form the real culture of the shrines. They have adopted the different professions and the Urs celebrations at the shrines are great opportunity for them to earn and participate in the Urs celebrations. According to Werbner

“For low caste peasants or Urban workers membership in the cult is a source of status. They derive their personal standing vis-à-vis others from their connection with an illustrious, important and famous saint. In this sense the respect accorded to Zindapir by high level politicians, civil servants or Army officers is not only for pragmatic purposes, but, perhaps even more significantly, it confirms, the saint’s elevated status in the eyes of the many villagers who form the main body of his disciples, and bring together the high and low in a single “family” of “disciple brotherhood”. The various status derived from the membership in an important order of this type is seen by these disciples as conferring a meaningful and dignified gloss on their lives.”¹

It is also pertinent to mention here that the lower classes and the upper class tend to be more affiliated with Sufism than the middle class. Werbner has also mentioned that

“Sufism remains attractive to apparently westernized high ranking civil servants, army officers, politicians, businessmen and professionals as well as to large numbers of relatively uneducated villagers. Zindapir had a large army following, including many brigadiers and generals. Among his disciples and supplicants were also politicians and high ranking civil servants. Sufism....thus appeared to appeal to the relatively educated and powerful, as well as to the vast mass of low ranking followers.”²

Most of the poor people indulge in professions not seen appropriate. They are unable to perform regular prayers due to their profession or some other reasons. They do not have the money to pay Zakat, perform Haj or observe fasting due to nature of their profession. Same story prevail in the upper class and they do not pay Zakat, perform regular prayers. Most of them are indulged in drinking, prostration and many other such social evils. Werbner thinks that these two classes are the regular visitors of the shrines because they think that it is the key

role of the saint to act as mediator for his disciples with God on the day of Judgment, ask forgiveness for them.

Lyallpur is not the land of Sufis as South Punjab is recognized but some saints or Sufis came here and rendered their services for the prestige of religion. Baba Lasoori Shah, Qaim Sain, Baba Noor Shah Wali, Maulana Sardar Ahmed, Sufi Barkat Ali are renowned Sufis in Lyallpur and their shrines have become the center of attraction for the masses of the region. Their annual Urs are arranged great enthusiasm and devotion. Urs is actually the death anniversary of the Saint. Frembgen says that

“For the Wali physical death marks the entry into the real life embodied in the mystical union with Allah, a moment of unification which is ritually celebrated as a holy marriage, an Urs, with God”³

In this research, the shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah has been taken as case study and concentrate on the current situation particularly the annual Urs celebration with following questions; how the shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah is helping in catering the socio-religious needs of the people? It is estimated that approximately millions of the people visit the shrine annually without any discrimination of sex, religion and caste. The Urs celebrations consist of three days. First day, the shrine is given ritual bath in the presence of district administration, politicians of the city, business community. The devotees bring the most beautiful Chaddars for the shrine. Some of the devotees cover the shrine with Chaddar due to their Manat. Manat is a conditional thing which is done after the completion of that worldly task successfully. People come in the form of groups at the shrine and few of them establish their deras. At these deras, the food is cooked and served to the visitors. Malangs are also the important features of the Urs celebrations at the shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah. They wear colorful clothes along with different articles and ornaments like langoti, choga, iron arm rings, long animal horns, begging bowl, ear rings. They appear with long hairs and shave. There are two kinds of opinions which have developed about such kind of malangs among the masses. On group of people declare them illiterate, dirty and drug addicts. Ewing also writes about such kind of malangs

“One activity that most Pakistanis consider to be in violation of the shariah and which is engaged in by malangs is the smoking of hashish (charas) and drinking of bhang. Fragrant use of charas marks the malang as being outside respectable society and also clearly sets him apart from a shar pir.”⁴

The usage of charas at the shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah is not considered irreligious. The groups of the people offer the visitors at their deras in the presence of security agencies. People smoke charas in excess. The malangs do not consider charas irreligious but they give the justification that it is source of communication between God and His follower. Ewing has also written about this condition of malangs in his book “The Malangs of the Punjab”

“.....once in a hashish induced state of intoxication (nasha), the malang enters into communion with God and receives His commands”⁵

Second school of thought does not take malangs serious and ignore them with the justification that these are innocent people. They should not be disturbed and their disturbance is not liked in Sufism due to their attachment with Sufi and their innocence. The pictures of the Saint is displayed at the deras or the on the walls with the pictures of the devotees. It is another form of personal advertisement. Flexes and banners of large sizes are placed at the main gates of the shops.

Another important feature of the Urs celebration is music in shape of Sama. Renowned musicians of Lyallpur, Fateh Ali Khan, Matha Ali Khan, Bakhshi Qawal, Dulara Khan, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Rahat Fateh Ali Khan, Zahid Mathi Ali Khan and Kashif Matha Ali Khan performed in the honor of the saint. All these qawal parties were the devotees of Baba Lasoori Shah and they consider their fame as barakat of Baba Jee shrine. First Lyallpur Music school was also established near the shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah by Dulara Khan. The land of Lyallpur produced many renowned musicians who contributed in the field of music and particularly in Qawali. In Sufism, Qawali is given special sacred status in Chishtiya Order and is considered source of spiritual elevation.

As far as the participation of the women is concerned, there are two kinds of shrines in Punjab. Firstly, allow the women to enter into the tomb of the saint and secondly, do not allow the women to enter into the tomb. In the shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah, women are allowed to enter into the tomb of the shrine and praying for blessings. A small portion of the shrine has been separated for the women where they can sit and practice religious exercises. But it is not observed the dance of aged women with the beat of drum as is criticized by the critics about the shrine culture. During the interviews of the women at the shrine, they told that they requested the saint for some special desires which have now fulfilled. They made a promise to the saint that they would participate in the Urs celebrations every year if their desires fulfilled. They have got their desires fulfilled and since then, they are participating in the Urs celebrations. Most of the women visit shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah for the resolution of their problems (asking for child, a male child, cure from the disease, elimination of poverty, obtaining a job, mental peace, marriage with beloved one). They come with some things which are distributed at the shrine as a vote of thanks to the saint. Some women bring salt and keep it at the shrine which takes people as barakat. Some of them burn *charagh* with oil (oil lamps). Even few women take *Jhaaro* for cleanliness.

Lunger is also an other important feature of the shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah. Lunger is partly sponsored by the Aukaf department and partly by the people. It consists of Daal and bread. It is not distributed all the year but at the time of annual Urs, special arrangements are made for the distribution of Lungar. Aukaf department make arrangements in the building of the shrine and the people cook food at their daras. Some devotees send heavy trucks which are loaded with

cooked foods and it is distributed among the visitors. There is great hustle and bustle at that time in daras. The poor people are eating food with any discrimination. It is the main cause of the popularity of the shrines in Punjab that they provide food to the needy and hungry people. Shrines serve humanity.

Dhamaal is another form of dance which is done at the shrines by visitors. Some writers declare it the condition of ecstasy when the Dhamaal is exercised. Some think that the people who exercise Dhamaal, they are mostly addicted and do so in intoxication. At the shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah, there are kinds of people who exercise Dhamaal. Firstly, they do so after fulfilling their desire which had been promised by the devotee, secondly, are those who take charas in excessive and exercise Dhamaal, thirdly, use bhang. These are the three causes which have been observed during the visit of the shrine. According to Muhammad Azam Choudhary,

“another important attraction at the shrines is bhang, the traditional summer drink of many males in Punjab. It is said to have cold effects against the scorching heat of the Punjabi summer. It includes cannabis, poppy, seeds, almond, milk and sugar. All these ingredients are grounded together in a clay pot for a long time before milk or water is added to it. It has intoxicating effects. It is favorite drink of malangs but other people also drink it. The cannabis is also used in the pakoras that produce intoxicating effects.”⁶

At the upper house of the shrine, there is a mosque for prayers five times a day. At the time of prayers, music is not played and people are engaged in the prayers. Most of these people belong to middle class. The poor people do not take it serious and remain busy in other activities at different daras. After the prayer, some people recite the Holy Quran at the grave of the saint and few of them are busy in reciting Darood Sharif loudly. The poor people lay more focus on social activities rather than religious. They touch the entrance wall and grave base, lay *chaddar* and roses on the grave, take oil from the burning oil lamps for the treatment of their diseases. Shrines also play role for the treatment of the diseases through *Tabarkaat*. Two factors are considered very important, firstly, the medical doctors have failed to provide them medicine against the disease and have been declared untreatable, secondly, the patients do not have the money to pay the doctors and take medicines. During the interview of the visitors during the Urs ceremonies at the shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah, they told these two factors to the author.

Donations or charity is also done at the shrine. The visitors make cash donations in the boxes which are under the control of Aukaf department. According to Aukaf department record, the total income of the shrine is 8.9 million Rupees per annum. At the outside of the shrine, large number baggers are waiting the financially better visitors. They are in very poor condition due to their physical look. Some are with begging bowl and some without of it. The visitors give them

few rupees for the pleasure of the saint. Babies, women, youngsters, old age male are included in the beggars.

It can be concluded that the shrines of the Sufis in the Punjab particularly the shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah presents religious flexibility and tolerance. The visitors tolerate each other and no serious conflict came to surface during Urs ceremonies of the saint. People interpret religion according to their requirement and circumstances. The shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah play role as shelter for the down trodden people. The hungry people get food. The needy beggars receive charity. The addicts drink bhang and take charas also. It provides support to the marginal groups and integrates them into the larger society. The study of the shrine of Baba Lasoori Shah presents a different picture of the shrines of Meher Ali Shah of Golra Sharif and Khwaja Shams ud Din Sialvi where the marginal groups are not allowed to enter or perform their Dhamaal or intoxication. The purpose of these two studies is to elaborate the different religious practices at the shrines in the Punjab. The spiritual practices at the shrine of Meher Ali shah has already been discussed in previous chapter.

Notes and References

¹ Pinna Werbner, *The Making of Muslim Dissent: Hybridized Discourses*, P. 105.

² Ibid.,

³ Juergen Frembgen, "The Majzub Mama Ji Sarkar: A Friend of God moves from one house to another," in Pinna Werbner and Helene Basu, eds., *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, locality and the performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults*, P. 140.

⁴ Kathrine Ewing, "*The Malangs of the Punjab: Intoxication or Adab as the Path to God*," P. 363.

⁵ Ewing, "*The Malangs of the Punjab*", P. 363.

⁶ Muhammad Azam Choudhary, *Religious Practices at Sufi Shrines in Punjab*, PP. 24-25.