

Beliefs and Behaviors of Shrine Visitors of Bibi Pak Daman

Abstract

The present study aims at focusing on what kind of beliefs are associated with the shrine visits that make them visitors believe and behave in a specific way. The shrine selected for this purpose was Bibi Pak Daman, Lahore, Pakistan. The visitors of this shrine were observed using non-participant observation method. Field notes were used to record observations and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three major themes emerged out of the data. The first major theme of immortality appeared with sub-themes of belief in existence after death, belief in supernatural powers of chaste ladies and objects placed at the shrine. The second theme that emerged consisted of superstitions with the sub-themes of superstitions related to objects and miracles/mannat system. The third theme that emerged was of the beliefs in the light of the placebo effect and the sub-themes included prayer fulfillment, enhanced spirituality and problem resolution.

Keywords: *Bibi Pak Daman, beliefs, shrine visitors*

INTRODUCTION

Islam has a unique role in meeting the spiritual needs of its followers through Sufism, which is defined as a system of beliefs wherein Muslims search for their spiritual knowledge in the course of direct personal experience and practice of Allah Almighty (Khan & Sajid, 2011). Sufism represents the spiritual dimension of Islam. Sufis played a major role in spreading Islam throughout the sub-continent, sometimes even more than the warriors. In early 12th century, Sufi saints connected the Hindus and Muslims with their deep devotion and love for God as the basic tenet of belief. These Sufi saints were simple human beings who served humanity irrespective of their faith, caste and nationality (Omer, 2014).

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Sufi shrines are found in all Muslim communities. These shrines are the tombs of Sufi saints that are known by different names such as Khanqah, Darbar, Mazar, Roza or Keramat etc. These shrines are known as “Dargah” in the Persian world, which literally means a “portal” or a “threshold” (Farooq and Ashraf, 2008). Historically, the first properly built shrine was constructed in 11th century by Malik Ayaz during Emperor Akbar’s rule. Since then, shrines are regarded as places where people go to satisfy their social, economic, spiritual and psychological aspirations (Abbas & Min Allah, 2015). The custom of visiting holy places to achieve religious value, getting rid of the sins and fulfillment of wishes is a common practice around the world (Frembgen, 2012). In the Islamic world, Sufi shrines hold a very important place in the spiritual life of the followers who visit these places. The shrine visitors have different purposes for visiting these shrines such as invoking the blessings and intercession of the Sufi saints, paying respect and praying, enhancing spirituality and fulfillment of their socio-economic needs. They may also tie mannat (hope) threads or distribute langar (food) at shrines. However, some Muslims do not believe in visiting shrines and hold a very critical view of it regarding it as equal to shirk (infidelity) (Farooq & Ashraf, 2008).

Pakistan is a developing country facing extreme socio-economic challenges since its independence. The majority of Pakistanis belong to the lower social class facing illiteracy, poor healthcare facilities and access to justice. Pakistan being an Islamic Republic holds a significant religious aspect and social structure towards Sufi shrines. Platteau (2011) argued that in Pakistan, Sufi shrines are considered to be common public places where followers perform different religious rituals considering them as virtuous. Manzo (2003) also said that the followers of these shrines elicit deeper emotional connection with their shrines. Upon this emotional relationship with these shrines, they maintain a very significant part of social life and religion in Pakistani society (Farooq & Kiyani, 2012).

It is also perceived that Sufi shrines are mainly visited by people belonging to a lower socioeconomic class for meeting needs of food, shelter and psychological health in Pakistan (Ahmad, 2012). A partial list of shrines in Pakistan includes, Data Darbar, Baha-ud-din Zakariya, Bibi Pak Daman, Fariduddin Ganjshakar Chishti, Khwaja Ghulam Farid Chishti Nizami, Shah Hussain, Shah Jamal Qadiriyyah, Pir Mangho, Sultan Bahoo, Abdullah Shah Ghazi, Syed Muhammad Usman (Lal Shahbaz Qalander Suhrawardiyya), Maher Ali Shah Golra Shareef Chishti and Abdul Wahab Faruqi Sachal Sarmast. For the purpose of this study observations were conducted on Bibi Pak Daman, Lahore, Pakistan. A brief introduction and historical overview of this shrine is presented as follows:

Bibi Pak Daman (chaste lady) is the name of the shrine and mausoleums of Bibi Ruqayyah bint Ali and five other Holy ladies, Bibi Asma, Bibi Ramla, Umm e Hani,

Umm e Luqman and Bibi Zainab. It is located in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan (Zehra, 2005). It is also believed that they are the family of Prophet Muhammad's household. It is believed that Bibi Ruqayyah (R.A) was the daughter of Hazrat Ali (R.A) and Umm al banin bint Huzaam. She (R.A) was the wife of Muslim ibn Aqeel and sister of Hadrat Abbas ibn Ali, while the other accompanying Holy Ladies are regarded as daughters and sisters of Muslim bin Aqeel who came to Lahore under supervision of Bibi Ruqayyah (R.A) after the battle of Karbala.

Some Sunni scholars regard these saintly ladies as being daughters of the Sufi saint, Syed Ahmed Tokhta, who lived in the 12th century. These women are believed to have a significant role in the spreading and teaching of Islam throughout Lahore. Legend also holds that Data Sahib used to visit and clean the shrine of Bibi Pak Daman and as a result gained his spiritual knowledge (Malik, 2015). The shrine is visited by both Shia and Sunni Muslims. The Urs of Bibi Pak Daman is celebrated from 7th to 9th Jumada al Thani, every Islamic year. Every day, the street leading to the shrine area remains packed with a large number of devotees coming from distant regions of Pakistan to fulfill their different aspirations.

Since it is evident that the shrine of Bibi Pak Daman has long been a site of great reverence for the shrine visitors, it was important to understand what kind of beliefs guide the visitors to visit the shrine and what kind of associations are developed with the chaste ladies that make the visitors attend the shrine. The present study is aimed at focusing on the shrine of Bibi Pak Daman in order to understand what kind of beliefs are held by the shrine visitors and whether these beliefs bring about some effect in their lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies have been conducted previously that focus on different perspectives of visiting shrines. In “Mannat and Associated Beliefs System of People Visiting Shrines” Batool et al. (2014) revealed belief systems linked with Mannat making among shrine visitors and the underlying reasons that force people to make Mannat. They selected a sample of 80 shrine visitors from Hazrat Bari Imam Shrine, Islamabad for a survey. The results revealed that 98.1% shrine visitors had a firm belief in making Mannat. This belief was prevalent among lower socioeconomic classes. Moreover, interviews from shrine visitors revealed that Mannat strengthens their inner satisfaction and peace.

In 2011, Ahmad also conducted a qualitative study understand the socio-economic background and psychological problems of visitors of Data Darbar, Shah Jamal and Mian Mir. He conducted 11 case studies that revealed that shrine visitors mostly belong to the lower socio-economic class. Some of these have made these shrines their crime sites mainly for theft, prostitution and human trafficking. The purpose of

visiting these shrines were also different among different visitors such as some revealed that they visit shrines before court hearings, starting a new business, or for resolution of family conflicts. He further categorized some shrine visitors as some destitute women, runaway children and helpless elders who stay at shrines for food and shelter as these shrines function as saviors for those who have certain social, economic, psychological problems.

Khan and Sajid (2011) conducted a mixed methods study to understand the belief system, rituals and key function of the shrines. They conducted interviews of 50 shrine visitors that revealed that shrines mainly provide spiritual satisfaction, social cohesion, food, recreation, religious authority, political patronage, social control and ways of stress management. While, shrine visitors take bayat (oath taking) and make mannat. Moreover, a review of the most prominent academic theories explaining the nature and functions of belief suggests more or less the similar conclusion and interconnectivity such as, according to the theory of belief bias based on studies by Henle (1962) and Luria (1976) people will tend to accept only what fits within their belief system without considering what they actually believe and likewise will reject what does not fit in their belief system, even if the statement presented to them is perfectly logical. This is even more true of illiterate people who believe by experience rather than logic.

Similarly, in the theory of belief perseverance, Ross, Lepper and Hubbard (1975) theorized that once we have decided to believe something, we will continue to believe it even in the face of contradictory evidence. It is very difficult to remove a belief. Studies based on researches by Cohen (1981), Kelley (1972), Weiner (1979, 1986) and Markus (1977) conclude that belief is a part of schema wherein we believe our mental models to be accurate. We organize and simplify our worldly knowledge around us and form schemas about us, others and almost everything. Another interesting approach to belief system is explained in the concept of placebo effect by Kennedy (1961) and Pecia et al. (2012). They defined the placebo effect where we believe and respond to fakes primarily related to the perceived effect of a medicine or treatment on the part of the patient, believed to be associated with enhanced spirituality (Kohls et al. 2011).

According to the theory of selective perception by Wilson and Abrahams (1977) we choose to believe what we like to believe ignoring what they really are. Visiting shrines is a choice that the shrine visitors make believing that this will have an effect on their lives irrespective of any plausible evidence. The same is explained in the parapsychological beliefs in previous researches such as Braud (1997) in "Parapsychology and Spirituality" by as the experience that cannot be explained or empirically proved. Orentstein (2002) argues that Parapsychological beliefs are profoundly religious. Tam and Shiah (2004) in "Paranormal Belief, Religiosity And

Cognitive Complexity” found positive relationship between parapsychological beliefs, superstitions, religiosity, spirituality, extraordinary-life forms, afterlife, precognition and traditional religious beliefs, whereas Goulding and Parker (2001) in “Finding Psi in the Paranormal” further broke down the Parapsychological beliefs into five major broad areas to approach reality beyond rationality including; 1. Telepathy that is defined a belief that someone understands others mind by non-human means. 2. Clairvoyance that is defined as the knowledge of objects, people, events or things that are hidden from the world and time. 3. Precognition is defined as knowledge of a future event before its occurrence. 4. Psychokinesis is defined as a superpower to move objects without touching and 5. Finally, survival studies deal with immortality.

Braud (1997) regards these elements as connected with spirituality. Hence, the above-mentioned previous studies provide evidence of the significance of the need to study what kind of beliefs are held by shrine visitors and whether these beliefs bring about some outcome. Most of these studies focus on social issues explored through interviews. However, no previous study has focused on employing the method of observation at any shrine to understand the natural environment of the shrines directly thus, such studies are missing in the Pakistani context. As people in Pakistan display unique beliefs and associations that give them the hope to put up with their lives that they have someone who is there for them and holds some extra-human power to help them. The present mixed methods study explored the beliefs of the shrine visitors of Bibi Pak Daman through non-participant observation.

Research Question

What are the fundamental beliefs held by shrine visitors that form the basis of their unique behavior?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present qualitative study employed non-participant observation to record the beliefs and behaviors of the shrine visitors of Bibi Pak Daman. Non-participant observation was considered appropriate for this study because, it provides direct contact with the natural context with a minimal chance for reactivity that may be very likely to happen in case of interviews. Whereas, non-participant observation allows the researcher to be ‘there’ at the site and observe directly the ‘natural environment’ of the site without any active participation. As the aim of the study was to understand the beliefs of the shrine visitors, it was considered the best method to observe them without their knowledge to minimize the chances of fakeness. Male and female visitors of shrine of Bibi Pak Daman were selected for observation during each visit. The sample consisted of all age groups; individuals were selected on the basis of level of importance of the activity they were involved in. For the purpose of recording observations during each visit, a template of field notes was developed which

consisted of date, time, day, location, weather, length of observation, sequence of events, description, key observations, and comments for reflexivity that allowed the researcher to write all detailed observations in each visit. Field notes are considered as the best way to stay focused and to achieve meaningful benefits from observations of a phenomenon. The field notes were transcribed after each visit.

Procedure

Before beginning the study, the researcher made a first visit to Bibi Pak Daman. The purpose behind this visit was to gain familiarity with the site, to understand its structure, and to see how shrine visitors use different locations within and outside the shrine during their visit to shrine. This first interaction with the shrine also helped the researcher to make a plan consisting of locations to use for observations and to balance time for highly concentrated areas and lower concentrated areas. This first visit may be thought of as a phase of general observation that led to a more specific observation focusing only on beliefs and behaviors of the shrine visitors. Then the researcher formulated a field note template for using in each visit. Once the study began, the shrine of Bibi Pak Daman was observed twice a week for a period of three months to understand and to explore the beliefs and behaviors of the shrine visitors. The male and female visitors of the shrine of Bibi Pak Daman were observed twice a week Thursday (noon) and Friday (evening) for a period of three months (March to May, 2016). The researcher spent two hours on each visit. The observations in twelve weeks were recorded regularly in field notes templates after each visit, which were later reviewed and transcribed. At some instances where the purpose was to gain more clarity about certain unique acts performed by the shrine visitors, the researcher, maintaining the position of an observer only, merely asked about the reason behind the unique action however, no interviews were taken. Moreover, a checklist was also developed to guide the course of observation such as time and space allocation. This resulted in enough data required for the analysis.

Criteria for Evaluation and Reflexivity

In this study, the interpretation of respondents' beliefs and behaviors may be influenced by the researcher's background. However, thematic analysis recognizes this fact that analysis is actually characterized by subjectivity acknowledging the researcher's own assumptions and explanations as a necessary precondition for making sense of participants' thoughts and feelings. Thus, the main task for them is to provide interpretations to the experiences of participants (Willig, 2001). Another factor may be that during the observations some events might have been overlooked due to the judgment of the researcher as an observer to focus only on the most important first if many things are happening all at once, this may be considered as a human limitation more than a subjective bias. Overall, the study was a product of observations of the respondents and environment of particularly Bibi Pak Daman so these findings may be considered as valid and reliable for Bibi Pak Daman only.

However, in terms of subjectivity, the interpretations of the key observations were examined by and discussed with a field expert who checked that themes/subthemes and interpretations were grounded in the data by reviewing each finding and repeating the process. Also, the field notes template included a reflexivity section to help the researcher to take account of personal interpretations, judgments or comments.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The collected data were analyzed manually using thematic analysis because it allows a researcher to draw themes from the data that lead to meaningful results. It is related to hermeneutics and phenomenology since, it includes deep interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon and helps the researcher to understand the beliefs, feelings, perceptions, experiences, and behaviors of the participants. The analysis consisted of the following six basic steps:

- First step included the careful reading and notes preparation through multiple readings of data recorded in field notes for familiarizing with the recurring patterns in the data. Some observations, preliminary observations and comments were also noted in the reflexive journal.
- Second step included the formation and definition of patterns. Moreover, their connection was identified in light of the research objectives. All the data were systemically coded and the data identified under same codes were collated and the reasons were recorded in the reflexive journal.
- Third step consisted of identifying themes by combining all the relevant codes together and thus a list of themes was generated. The description regarding combining and defining themes was noted in the reflexive journal.
- Fourth step consisted of revising and redefining themes at two levels i.e. at codes level and themes level.
- Fifth step included defining and naming themes, in which the researcher defined and named each theme that emerged.
- Sixth step included producing the report, in which the researcher finally provided a thick description of the results of the study under the following themes:

The first major theme emerged was belief in immortality (existence after death) of the chaste ladies. The two sub-themes consisted of belief in the existence of the chaste ladies and the supernatural powers of the chaste ladies and the objects placed at the shrine. As explained by Orenstein (2002) that parapsychological beliefs consist of the set of beliefs regarding life after death, supernatural powers and experiences. Thus, the present study suggests that the participants who visited shrines might already have a tendency towards believing in parapsychological beliefs and thus visit the shrine for satisfaction of the same. However, each sub-theme is further discussed separately for substantiating in the light of related observations and previous literature.

Immortality

It was observed that both male and female shrine visitors had firm faith in the existence of the chaste ladies even after it was even evident from the seven graves being present in the shrine that these chaste ladies had long gone from this world. However, majority of male and female shrine visitors looked confident that the chaste ladies were present there and that they were being watched. One of the shrine visitors affirmed that it is her belief that everything is mortal except for the ladies and their true followers. The shrine visitors were also heard uttering the phrases, ‘they will listen’, ‘they are watching’, ‘I am going to pay salam to bibi sahab’, thus this attribution of hearing, seeing and answering abilities to a non-living entity suggests that the shrine visitors held a parapsychological belief regarding life after death. Orenstein (2002) also argues that the claims regarding life after death are possible in the spiritual traditions.

Supernatural powers of chaste ladies

In addition to the belief that the chaste ladies were immortal, it was also observed that the shrine visitors have also attributed some superpowers to these chaste ladies. For example, it was believed by the visitors that every Wednesday evening Bibi Ruqayah cried and only those who are sad and have firm faith in her could hear her. Many shrine visitors stuck their faces with the walls of her tomb so that their cries and prayers could be heard and responded.

It was observed that shrine visitors both men and women had firm faith in their superpowers such as, listening the unheard, seeing the unseen, changing fates, and granting wishes. In this regard, the observer inquired about the kind of superpowers do they believe in regarding these chaste ladies in order to further probe and confirm the finding. The shrine visitors verbally acknowledged that the chaste ladies had the ability to make their true followers immortal, guide those who digress, bless the followers with prosperity, listen the silent cries and bless with a son.

Supernatural powers of objects

The researcher had been observing the central shrine area, it was seen that a large number of male and female shrine visitors demonstrating their faith in the holiness of tangible objects placed at the shrine such as many male and female shrine visitors were seen applying oil from the lamps placed near the central shrine that they believe to have spiritual powers for good health. For example, a young man was seen filling up a bottle with the oil in the lamps. He said that his wife has a cyst near one of her eyes. He would apply this oil on the cyst and it would be healed as it had spiritual powers.

Moreover, there were two huge marble bowls full of salt that was tasted by a large number of shrine visitors. This salt is regarded to have Sufi connection-a healer of soul. Flower petals also hold significance for these visitors, as it is the most common thing to be noticed at first sight. For instance, a woman collected rose petals in her fist from all six graves, then she went to her husband and they both ate them up and prayed. Upon inquiry, she told that they were childless and these flower petals have spiritual power, they would be blessed with a child soon. This reflects their belief in the spiritual healing power of flower petals. It was also seen that new fathers touch their infants with the walls and marble nets of shrine Bibi Ruqayyah to seek her blessings.

As Orenstein (2002) argues that if we believe that minor miracles such as, telepathy (power to hear the unheard), clairvoyance (seeing the unseen), precognition (knowing the future) or psychokinesis (superpower to perform extra human activities) happen then bigger miracles, healings and powers described in various mythological, religious or spiritual traditions can also occur. So, it can be inferred that attribution of superpowers to the chaste ladies and the objects is a unique phenomenon observed at the shrine. Thus, this sub-theme represents another important aspect of a parapsychological belief.

Superstitions

The second major theme to emerge was the prevalence of ‘superstitions’. The sub-themes emerged were superstitions related to objects and miracles/mannat system. As explained below:

Superstitions associated with objects

It was also observed that some of the shrine visitors believed in superstitions such as effects of evil eyes could be eliminated by brooming all over the body. Many shrine visitors requested the sweepers to sway the brooms all over their bodies because this could protect them from evil. Other believed that this could save their lives:

A young girl went to a sweeper and said, ‘I have just survived death two days ago, I got electric shock, the sweeper swayed the broom over her whole body and said, ‘you are victim of evil eye’, then she hit the broom on the floor and said, ‘Now it’s gone, Bibi will protect you now’.

Similarly, another perennial observation revealed that some shrine visitors believed that they were under some ghostly possession, which could be healed with their visit at the shrine as they would be able to get someone to help them. For example, a middle-aged woman was talking to a young girl who had beautiful big eyes and told her that she was possessed by some ghost or evil spirit and she could help if she was willing. Another woman was talking to a married young lady and told her that her

husband had been cheating on her then she made her an amulet and instructed her to place under her husband's pillow before his bed time, promising her that this act would win her husband over again

Miracles/Mannat System

It was also observed that many shrine visitors had belief in mannat and miracles as it was seen that many respondents visited shrine with the intention of making mannat there. They confidently tied threads with the net of main shrine or distributed the popular 14 mannat's laddoos (confectionary). It was believed by many respondents that when they make mannats miracles happen such as, their names are drawn in money committees, lost children are found, childlessness is cured, sons are born, surgical operation are successful.

As discussed earlier, some shrine visitors were also seen believing in the spiritual powers of oil, salt, flower petals, nets and marble walls. This finding is supported by a previous study by Abbas and Min Allah (2015) that found that shrine visitors consider all the objects placed at the shrine as sacred and they said that they use these objects to fulfill their spiritual, psychological, economic and social needs. This finding is affirmed by the previous claim by Tobacyk (1988) who argued that parapsychological beliefs were theoretical formed based on the superstitions.

Placebo effect

The third important theme that emerged out of the observations was that of placebo effect. In terms of present study, it can be defined as the belief that the visit at shrine has a positive effect on their lives and that they feel better now. Three sub-themes such as prayers fulfillment, enhanced spirituality and problem resolution. Details are explained as below:

Prayer fulfillment

A majority of shrine visitors was seen praying fervently at the shrine with the firm belief that praying at the shrine means the fulfillment of wishes and desires. One of the shrine visitors verbally acknowledged that he was a weak Muslim and feared that Allah would not listen to his prayers therefore; he visited the shrine of Bibi Pak Daman because he believed that it would not be turned down. Thus, many shrine visitors seemed to believe that even visiting the chaste ladies means the fulfillment of their prayers. A number of previous studies have confirmed that the faithful visitors of holy sites display more placebo effect than those who do not (McFarling 1999; Strawbridge 1997; Koenig et. Al. 1997; & Oxman et. al. 1995).

Spirituality

Many shrine visitors claimed that their weak religiosity and lack of observance of religious duties keep them away from seeking Allah's mercy so they visit the shrine

because Allah will fulfill their wishes for the sake of these chaste ladies. They indicated that their spirituality was enhanced as they experience God nearer to them at the shrine. A shrine visitor verbally acknowledged that he did not find time to pray, therefore he visited shrine so that he could feel Allah near him. Others also affirmed that they find a connection with Allah at this shrine as Bibi Pak Daman plays a role of a bridge between them and Allah. A shrine visitor said that he did not feel the same spirituality at home. Thus, it reflects the belief that visiting shrine is regarded as a way to connect with Allah near shrine visitors. Believing that visit to shrine enhances their connection with Allah might manifest on a behavioral level where they express through performance of certain rituals and believing in symbols. Similarly, Kohls et al. (2011) found a positive relationship between spirituality has the placebo effect.

Problem resolution

Another important observation was that shrine visitors believed that once they visit the shrine their acute health problems would resolve immediately. For example, one shrine visitor shared that her sister had given birth to a son after 35 years of marriage when every hope had ended and doctors had refused to help further. She also went to abroad for treatment. Doctors told her that she had no complete uterus to carry a fetus and was diagnosed infertile. Once, she visited Bibi Pak Daman and prayed here and Bibi gave her a son. Doctors went crazy as they could not understand what had happened. Bibi did what science failed to do. Another middle-aged female shrine visitor shared that she has visited shrine and now she was confident that her abusing husband would be a better person. Moreover, another informed that his name was drawn in a committee because he visited the shrine before the draw. Thus, it shows that the shrine visitors believed their conditions were improved because they visited the shrine.

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights a unique way of understanding the beliefs of the shrine visitors of Bibi Pak Daman through non-participant observations. It was revealed that the shrine visitors hold parapsychological beliefs as evident by the findings under the major themes and their respective sub-themes. Shrine visitors mainly attribute the characteristics of immortality and superpowers to these ladies. However, they also believed in the superstitions associated with powers of objects placed on shrines. Lastly, it was also observed that the shrine visitors also had firm belief in the placebo effects of their visits at the shrine as they believed it caused betterment in their lives. Thus, it is concluded that people who visit the shrine have a propensity to believe in supernatural powers, which they look up to in order to make up for the something missing in their lives.

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