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SOCL-363

Shrine Ethnography

Introduction

a) *Purpose of visiting the Shrine:*

The purpose for me in visiting a shrine was to observe the cultural practices, patterns and behaviors influenced by the shrine or the Saint buried at the shrine. Observing the cultural practices and behaviors is not limited to the extent of their devotion towards the saint or their inclination towards religion or spirituality or if they perform some specific practices, but it also includes observing the Defacto's; whether someone is gaining interest from the shrine's functions, if yes who? etc.

b) *Description of the shrine:*

The shrine of 'Baba Gaib Ali Shah' is located on Abbott Road right after the Davis Road, Empress Road and Egerton Road intersection, crossing Shimla Pahari it lies on the right side of the road in between the territory of Directorate General Public Relations and Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation office. After being declined by the administration of the shrine of 'Bibi Pak Daman' on my request to let, me and a friend accompanying me, inside the shrine, since the shrine of Bibi Pak Daman was under construction, me and my friend decided not to waste the opportunity of standing at the old Lahore locale. We asked a random souvenir shopkeeper outside the shrine of 'Bibi Pak Daman' to tell us if there is any nearby shrine which has a history worth knowing, since I was a little excited too along with feeling nervous. The

shopkeeper asked his fellow shopkeeper who then guided us the way to the shrine of ‘Baba Gaib Ali Shah’, which literally means ‘the invisible saint’. It was a pleasant midnight as it was drizzling, we reached the shrine of ‘Baba Gaib Ali Shah’ at around 11:30 pm. The first look of the shrine was quite remarkable as there were people standing outside the shrine, some on motorcycles were praying outside the shrine with their hands up against their faces. It was a small shrine with a narrow entrance, with a maximum capacity of seven to ten people at a time. It was a cubicle like structure, upon entering the shrine the very first thing you see on the front, at distance of only two footsteps, is the ‘tomb’ or the grave of the saint ‘Gaib Ali Shah’. On the right there is a ‘Wazu’ place and on the left corner there are metallic storage compartments which I was told are also used for the storage of the “offerings”. There was also a stage like pavement at the right side of the shrine where, I was told, Qawali is held on every Thursday of the week. It was Wednesday, and the caretakers were decorating the shrine with confetti and other embellishments. There were around three to four people inside the shrine and the same number of people were standing outside the shrine. As I entered the shrine after taking my shoes off, I greeted the first man among the four inside the shrine and introduced myself by showing my student ID card. That person was wearing a shalwar kameez and a cap covering his hair. He was quite respectful and decent with his response. As he shakes my hand, I said to that person about my inquiry that, I want to learn about the saint buried here and the nature of ‘Kalam’ being used in the shrine. He asked another man standing beside him to call someone. After calling for him several times, finally that man appears, his name was Wasim who was one of the care takers among them at that time. Wasim appeared to be the most knowledgeable among them all and so that is why I decided to interview him. Wasim did know very much about the shrine, but when I asked to tape the interview, he started hesitating and smiling out of shyness. So, I interviewed him without recording the interview.

c) *Methodology:*

Initially the method using which I had to conduct my whole interview was to interview about the nature of 'Kalam' used in the shrine. But as soon as I interviewed the caretaker of the shrine Wasim, the entire dynamic of the interview changed. After introducing myself to Wasim, I asked him to tell me the history of the shrine and the saint buried in the shrine. Wasim smiled as if he was almost laughing, not in a disgraceful and disrespecting manner, but as if my question was irrelevant, as it is something I should have known beforehand. Wasim answered my question by saying that "Baba Gaib hain" which literally means that "The Saint is invisible", he then told me that the saint has no name which is known to anyone. When I asked him about the Kalam he replied to me saying that there is no kalam, neither is there any writing associated with 'Baba Gaib Ali Shah'. Wasim told me that his grandmother, father and his grandfather have all served the saint by maintaining the shrine. He then said to me about my question regarding the history of shrine, he said that his grandmother told him that this shrine used to be just a grave and a shanty like structure far behind the main road, then the offices surrounding the shrine started constructing buildings, they were also ordered to demolish the shrine but the disciples did not let this happen. He also told me that his grandmother said to him that the shrine extended its territory by itself, on which he paused a little waiting for me to show him some response and so, I said 'MashaAllah' in response. The interview's duration was around 3-4 minutes; the caretaker hesitated out of shyness when I asked him if I can record the conversation. So, to further know about the saint and the shrine I asked a man who was standing outside the shrine praying with his hands up. Meanwhile, I got permission from the caretaker to take pictures of the shrine and took some afterwards. Then I moved back to the man on the bike and introduced myself, initially he thought I was a youtuber as he saw me taking pictures of the shrine but after I introduced myself

properly, he agreed on letting me tape and conduct the interview. I asked his name (which was Muhammad Ali) as soon as I met him, so the interview begins with him answering to my question regarding the history of the shrine.

Accounts of scripts:

- a) Below table contains the scripts inscribed on the walls of shrine that I found significant for this ethnography.

| Inscription Number | Location | Language | Verse, name, saying etc. |
|--------------------|--|----------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Right wall from the entrance just before the tomb's entrance | Urdu | يا على |
| 2 | Right wall from the entrance just before the tomb's entrance | Urdu | شہزادہ علی اصغر |
| 3 | Right wall from the entrance just before the tomb's entrance | Urdu | يا غازی عباس |
| 4 | Right wall from the entrance just before the tomb's entrance | Urdu | محمد |

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|---|--|--------|--|
| 5 | Left wall right after the entrance, above the storage compartments | Arabic | اللَّهُمَّ صَلِّ عَلَى مُحَمَّدٍ وَعَلَى آلِ مُحَمَّدٍ كَمَا صَلَّيْتَ عَلَى إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَعَلَى آلِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ إِنَّكَ حَمِيدٌ مُجِيدٌ اللَّهُمَّ بَارِكْ عَلَى مُحَمَّدٍ وَعَلَى آلِ مُحَمَّدٍ كَمَا بَارَكْتَ عَلَى إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَعَلَى آلِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ إِنَّكَ حَمِيدٌ مُجِيدٌ |
|---|--|--------|--|

b) *English translation of the above inscriptions:*

Inscription#01:

Translation: “Oh Ali” Used as a call or invocation commonly used by Shia Muslims to show their, devotion, love and respect to Imam Ali a figure of importance and great respect especially in Shia sect.

Inscription#02:

Translation: Literally it means “Prince Ali Asghar” the youngest son of Imam Hussain. He is also identified as a figure of respect in Shia sect.

Inscription#03:

Translation: “OH Ghazi Abbas” the name of the son of Ali Ibn Abi Talib a Muslim caliph and the first Imam of Shia doctrine.

Inscription#04:

Translation: “Muhammad” (P.B.U.H) the last holy Prophet in the religion of Islam.

Inscription#05:

Translation: Darood Sharif is Salam and salutations for Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) below is the English translation for it:

“O Allah, send prayers upon Muhammad and upon the family of Muhammad, as You sent prayers upon Ibraaheem and upon the family of Ibraaheem; You are indeed Worthy of Praise, Full of Glory. O Allaah, send blessings upon Muhammad and upon the family of Muhammad as You sent blessings upon Ibraaheem and upon the family of Ibraaheem; You are indeed Worthy of Praise, Full of Glory).”

Transcription from the interview:

The below piece of the interview is of Muhammad Ali’s interview, I asked him what he knows about the history of the Shrine, and this was his response:

[00:00:01] Muhammad Ali: (Speaking with devotion) (Constant traffic noises in the background)

The history of the shrine is that you find peace praying over here.. He (referring to the saint) is a great figure for us, (Raises voice) He was a... he was a great saint for us. Allah had blessed him with a very good (Distorted word/unable to be understood), he used to sell oil over here, (Speaks in explaining manner) in old times people used oil because there were no electricity in those times, in old times people used oil in their homes, people would use small oil lamps, oil lamps

and cooking would also be done in oi.. oil.. So.. One history of here (referring to the shrine) which our elders tell us is that.. my father told me is that, one time a man came while he (referring to the saint) was busy with his prayer (Pauses) He was busy with his prayer and the oil would be right here. He came (referring to the man who came to the saint) and said that give us oil of this much amount, he (referring to the saint) said ok, put the money in the money box and take the oil equal to the amount of money you put. He thinks that the saint is not watching me, he is indulged in his prayer, so he takes the oil to his home without putting any money. He goes home and sees that there is no oil, he then goes back to the saint and asks him that, I poured oil but there is no oil in it, the saint replies take the amount of oil equivalent to.. (fumbles while speaking) the money you have put in the box, he then pours oil and brings it his home, and then again there is no oil, he then comes back to the saint and tells him that I pour oil but when I get home there is no oil, saint replies “how much money do you put son?”.(Pauses) [00:01:26]

Summary/Conclusion:

Through this shrine experience I had the opportunity to look at the prevalent influence that places like shrines can have on people. I heard different narratives on the history of the shrine and about the saint ‘Baba Gaib Ali Shah’. As soon as I left the shrine I started thinking curiously about the shrine and my head was filled with questions; questions like, how can so many people blindly believe in some figure and give him the title of saint? Or who built the shrine? Who or which authority manages and maintains the shrine? How can people believe a whole set of different realities associated with the shrine? These were among a few of the many questions that came into my head that day. One thing which stayed in my head for quite a long time was the question of who was managing the shrine? Who was managing all the donations, as there were no relatives or people related to the saint, the question arises. After I got back from the shrine I

did some research related to the shrine and I found an article about the shrine of ‘Baba Gaib Ali Shah’ in which Salman Rashid talks about and questions the legitimacy of the shrine by arising questions like which office/department/authority owns the land on which the shrine is constructed, how the shrine has been built upon illegally obtained land etc. Indeed, for a man having the least bit understanding of logic and reasoning, this whole concept of a saint known to none would sound like a shallow story. My experience while interacting with the caretakers was quite profound in a sense that, my purpose of this entire ethnographic experience was to observe the cultural practices, behaviors and patterns influenced by the shrine or the saint, and after interacting with the people who were present at the shrine I found out that they all, majority who the people who came to the shrine belonged to a lower socio-economic status, SES is one of the determinant of defining religious inclination, but it also varies on the context of the country(Heaton, 2013). Another thing which intrigued me the most was the frequent use of inscription (posters, banners etc.) associated with the Shia sect. They did not know anything about the saint, not even his name, but what they were sure about was that the saint must have followed the Shia doctrine. This clearly shows that the dominating authority involved in the maintenance of the shrine must belong to the Shia sect making it obvious that there is some gain behind the whole idea of this invisible saint.

Photography









Work cited

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