
Sufi Customs at the shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai Promote Tolerance: An Analysis

Dr. Aijaz Ali Khoso*

Dr. Ali Murad Lajwani**

Abstract

Spiritual practices at shrines of Sufi saints are major source of connecting human souls. This exists at the Sufi shrines in the present crucial circumstances. The Sufi customs at shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai promote sense of religious tolerance, and universal love to mankind. One can realize the purity of mind, and soul while seeing his whitish shiny tomb from the distance of many miles. It is situated at the mound of a sandy dune, familiarly known as “Bhit” which was developed centre of spiritual rites by Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai himself during period of 1668-1752 A.D. In this way it was named as “Bhitshah”. While staying at there at Bhitshah, he engaged devotees to make an oval-shape plain area at the top of the mound. It was the commencement of Sufi practices at Bhitshah. Slow and steady, the Sufi customs were started as spiritual-music (Shah-Jo-Raag), a ritual of evening prayers gathering (Halka), collective prayers practice (Sahao-Soomar) on every first Monday of each month as per Islamic Calendar, a devotional dance (Dhamal) every day at the time of sun-setting were regular rituals at this shrine. This is the hub of all ritual practices where peoples from every religion participate with heart and soul. Women from Hindu, Christian and other religions eagerly take part in Sufi customs - this is how it is a unique phenomenon, and it can be further promoted for addressing the major issues of intolerance and rigidity.

Keywords: Sufi customs, Collective prayers (Sahao-Soomar), Spiritual-music (Shah-Jo-Raag), Gathering of evening prayers (Halka), Devotional dance (Dhamal).

Introduction:

Many people of different faiths and religions are engrossed round the year at the shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. Around four or five hundred people visit for seeking spiritual satisfaction at usual events and at special annual Urs where number of devotees swells up-to three or four Lac. Urs is an annual event where people congregate each other and participate in different cultural events, singing, dancing, recreational activities and other folk segments mostly performed by the indigenous people. The celebrations of Urs practices are carried out at the shrine with prayers, distribution of food to hungry people, and prayers by the custodian of shrine (Sajjada Nasheen), along with followers and devotees. The culture of Pakistan is strongly linked to openness where rituals and social customs are always celebrated at the Sufi shrines – throughout the year with devotion. The statistical figures are witnessing that shrine culture is more open and there is visible examples of religious harmony. When someone enters in the shrine no one knows about the religion but a devotee has same right to visit shrine and attend the rituals (Dawn: 2012). For every attendee rite at shrine is a same action which is symbol of universal extension towards the humanity. The Holy Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (Peace Be upon Him) said “the value of action is only through their intentions”. It clearly teaches us that the our intention while attending ritual at shrine is only respecting the human being without any difference of caste and creed. The inward attitude is voice of

* Assistant Professor, University of Sufism and Modern Sciences (USMS), Bhitshah, Pakistan

** PhD Scholar (Sociology) University of Sufism and Modern Sciences (USMS), Bhitshah, Pakistan .

our soul to submit everything before our master (Titus Burckhardt, 2008 page-89).

Literature Review:

The authentic published record witnesses the information regarding the spiritual rituals at the Sufi shrines. There is well-written knowledge about the indigenous structural components, besides the historical facts. The Sufi shrine of Hazrat Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai has been centre of spiritual and social rituals round the year. It is consisted on different special divisions. Each special area of shrine has a connection with Sufi the customs, under the white tomb there is grave of Hazrat Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and his successors namely Syed Jamal Shah (Inside the wooden framed structure). In northern side, there is tomb of Hazrat Shah Habib (father of Shah Latif), and graveyard where Syed family members, relatives of custodians (till-the date) and re-known scholars are buried surrounded, besides, there is a historical mosque (that was constructed in Kalhora period (1701-1783 A.D.) in presence of Shah himself. Just out-side the thick wall of tomb – there is another constructed sitting room is available known as “nishatgah” where a wooden cot, a turban, a wooden stick and other valuable items of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai are preserved. Majority of the people is still unaware and only few devotees and special guests do come there while visiting at the shrine. Therefore, area of nishatgah remains, closed generally and it is opened on special occasions. In southern part of Shah’s tomb there is a place known as main-guest house (Wadi-Otaque) where devotees (Singers of Shah-Jo-Raag) of Shah often to sit while preparing for performing Shah-Jo-Raag. As per record of oral information Shah himself was sitting there but later on senior devotee namely Tamar Faqeer was asked to look-after and use the place for prayers. It was named as main guest house (Wadi Otaque), till this date same practice is continued, and it is used a place for Faqeers with necessary permission of custodian (Sajjada-Nasheen). Under the feet of mound “Bhit” there is another cultural heritage site named “Hujra” – a place of improving insight on spiritual strength and surrendering everything to God and keeping himself free from the worries. With necessary consent of custodian (Sajada-Nasheen) all these heritages are ties through spiritual congregations.

Spiritual-music (Sufi-Raag):

The esthetic of spiritual music is very unique. It fills the hearts with human beyond the boundaries many people take keen interest in listening the spiritual-music sung at the shrines of Sufi saints. This taste of Sufi music is very integral part of rituals and customs at the shrines. Ideally spiritual music is arranged at the night time but is carried out at day time with same devotion. The music tradition at the shrine of Hazrat Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (Bhitshah, Pakistan) is very different is called as “Shah-Jo-Raag”. He made a circle-shaped sitting arrangement with beautiful voice to convey the global community on connecting hearts of people together. Another tremendous spiritual-music with flavor of Urdu, Punjabi and Seraiki languages is famous very famous at the shrines is called “Qawali”. Sufi-music “Qawali” has strong roots within the teachings of Islam. It is a language or voice of “human-love” every soul on earth listen the language of spiritual-music. It is path to union to God and it is ultimate truth which never stops within the limitations of boundaries. The shrine of Baha-u-Din Zakaria is in Multan (Punjab, Pakistan) where Qawali sit at the entrances of the shrine-gate and often perform “Qawali”. It gives an indication of peaceful manners – they perform word-by-word with clapping style. Clapping is sign of encouraging and offering determination to

people. There are many other forms of spiritual-music which helps in addressing the mental stress and worries. Visitors at shrines listen music and move head in toe and fro without understanding the language or steps of the music but feels that it gives some relief and psychosocial assistance. Academic institutions in advanced countries manage psychosocial assistance with help of such spiritual music and other meditational practices. We have large number of Sufi shrines almost there is shrine near every academic institution but still no any research carried out. We need to establish labs for particular experiments and can help many souls with health rest and love – this is what where we need to step head very urgently.

Food distribution for hungry people:

The free meal/food distribution practice is similarly occurred at each shrine. In native language this is called “Langar” means free food. The word Langar as per Oxford Dictionary has origins in the Hindi language. The same word is also used for free kitchen in worship place Gurdwara where free meal is served to visitors without distinction of religion, caste, ethnicity and social status. At the shrines of Sufi saints free food is distributed mostly vegetarian, it is served on the floor and large numbers of people eat this food and they manage the hunger. It is symbol of equality daily thousands of people are getting this food but charity is increasing day by day. This volunteerism and feeding practice is not outwardly showed, not politicized. Any rich person cannot claim in Pakistan that he/she is feeding poor people in the same way as this charity is carried out at the shrines. The good stories of charity and food distribution are not published in the text books. There are only pictorial views of the tombs and some historical figures. Even young researchers have never attempted their academic researches on such humanitarian act. This is one good lesson of the Sufism where we need to expend our research notions in the future.

Festival/Cultural events:

The shrines are spiritually and culturally connected throughout the Pakistan. As per shrine rituals Annual Urs is celebrated at each shrine on the dates when these Sufi saints were died. It is common practice among the Muslim community they sit three days at the place and collectively pray for the soul of died person. It is believed that the death of Sufi saints is union with God; due to this they have high rank among the creations. It is most common practices at the shrines that every year three days festivals are held where large number of people gather and enjoy the cultural values. In the celebrations of these events mostly people participate in collective prayers at the beginning and closing of festival. The events remain full joy for men, women and children. Devotees often attend prayers at the shrine and thereafter they listen spiritual and folk-music events, literary conferences, cattle shows, exhibitions, sports, and food stalls. During the hot and cold season thousands of people from every walk of life attend these events. At the inaugural sessions high officials participate along with the custodians (Sajjada Nasheen) of the shrines.

Sufi Message (Poetry, Prose and Stories):

Sufi poetry is composed in different regional languages and dialects. One thing is most common in the Sufi poetry composed by different Sufi poets that the language of common and poor people. Each Sufi saint lived with poor people and preached them the loving manners.

Sufi poetries are composed in Urdu, Sindhi, Punjabi, Balochi, Hindko, Seraiki, Kashmiri, Pashtu, Barhvi, Brushaski and etc.

The Sufi poetries of Bulleh Shah, Sultan Bahoo, Khawaja Ghulam Fareed, Sachal Sarmast and others. Bulleh Shah was poet of Punjabi language; Sultan Bahoo composed his poetry in Seraiki, Sachal Sarmast in Sindhi. Hazrat Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai also composed his poetry in Sindhi language with the unique flavor of seven cultural folk-tales, namely Umer-Marvi, Noori-Jam Tamachi, Sasui-Punhoon, Moomal-Ranu, Leela-Chanesar, Suhni-Mehar, and Sorath-Raidyach. The taste of Shah's poetry is melodious in its original composition and it has the great lesson for people to love humanity and be tolerated and for bearing during all seasons. In this way these seven stories are titled with the names of seven women and these women became signs of courage for women in Pakistan and South Asia. History witnesses that Sufi poets were often delivering lectures on selected topics.

Evening prayers (Halka)

Halka when people sit in a round circle to perform a religious rite is called Halka. It is led by a Faqeer key-holder of shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. In the end of the ritual of recitation of sacred words "Zikir" the Fakeers distribute sweet meal among the disciples of the shrine.

Devotional dance (Dhamal)

Everyday nearly at sun setting time Faqeers and devotees start making a circle within the courtyard of shrine a place of drum beating called "Nobat Khano". A person arrives at the elevated place Nobat Khano. He keeps two small-sized drums in opposite side and starts beating naqara with the chanting voice of these drums devotees start making primary and secondary circles. Initially few participants and then large group of people instinctively start moving their heads, body in very unique style even they are unaware of their surroundings or who next is there. While moving their body they keep changing their feet – this frequent change of feet is Dhamal. The same was reported in dawn news paper that when the beats of the drums gather pace, the group begins to swell: soon, women join in too. Lost in the trance are devotees of all kinds and hues: landless peasants, pregnant women, professionals, those suffering at the hands of poverty, even, those looking for business to boom. The Dhamal continues for around 40 minutes, it ends moments before Maghrib prayers, when the degree faqirs prays to Almighty Allah for the welfare, prosperity and peace of the universe in line with Bhittai's message (Dawn, 2014).

Collective prayers (Sama or Sahao-Soomar)

Every first Monday night of each month as per Islamic Calendar at sharp 10:00pm – devotees gather for collective prayers called Sama or Sahao-Soomar. At the courtyard of shrine there is square shaped fence where dry weeds are collected throughout the month. While in very first Monday night of every month devotees gather and make a circle around the fire with rhythmic recitation of sacred words "Zikir Allahoo, Allahoo, Ya Ahad, Ya Ahad" means there is only one God. We all are equal in creation and we take vow for maintaining brotherhood and peace in the society. It is spiritual elevation and there are two kinds of Sama as per Risalo of Shah Karim known as "Bayan-ul- Afreen" and Tanbih-ul-Fazlin" Qadri order and Avesi

order. The Qadri order of mystic was introduced by Shah Karim Bulri (Grandfather of Shah Latif) where devotees are singing and dancing in ecstasy. Another is Avesi order of mysticism in which spiritual exercise of the repetition of God's name is done while standing or sitting at one place (Manzoor Kanasro, 2007 pages58-60). Sufism has been prominent in South Asia for the last 10 centuries. The word Sufi means a coarse wool fabric, the type worn by Sufi mystics. It has strong elements of mysticism, giving no importance to rituals, aimed at an understanding of the divine by transcending anthropomorphic understandings. This is similar to the belief held by Bhakti saints also. The Sufi and Bhakti tradition in Pakistan and India are two such trends from within Islam and Hinduism respectively, that are focused more on the unity of humanity as a whole, overcoming sectarian divides (Dawn: 2015). There are folk-practices and customs are certain norms that promote constructive behavior. Norm is standard or behavioral expectation by group members. These are varying from society to society. Each group in society has its own norms to a certain extent. There is no social group without norms and within same society they differ with age, sex, occupation and social status of the individuals (Abdul Hameed Taga 2010 pages-188-189).

Research Methodology:

The qualitative research design was chosen for the present research. In qualitative research two techniques were conducted, firstly the in-depth interviews with open-ended questions having detailed answers were held with the respondents while attending the spiritual customs at different times. Secondly, the participant observation technique was also implemented to study the nonverbal spiritual gestures, feelings, spiritual phrases and words used during these customs round the year. The running notes were taken carefully, with the special focus on the performance of sacred words "Zikir like Allah Hoo, Ya Ahad, Hoo, etc". The spiritual leader custodian of the shrine (Sajjada Nasheen) was requested to share his views on this spiritual legacy and series of the events arranged throughout the year-long. Besides, his relatives from the Syed Kazmi family were interviewed with the same purpose. Finally, senior disciples (Fakeers of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai) were equally involved in the data collection process. This helped in discovering such treasured knowledge beyond the difference. As a matter of fact, the researcher himself belongs to one of the disciples' (Lajwani Fakeers Community) family, therefore, the entire data collection process remained vigorous and meaningful.

Conclusion:

The spiritual customs has been practiced equally by people from different religions at the shrine of Hazrat Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. These customs are basically associated with norms of Sindhi culture and the code of morality. This is a very true aspect of mysticism and essential unity code demonstrated without discrimination of religious identity purely role of good human behaviors'. The sacred words chanted as "Allah Hoo, Ya Ahad, Hoo Allah" are the spiritual expressions of a comprehensive vision of reality not merely performing during the arrangement of custom but an entirely true practical application of the spiritual values and practices. This is the beginning of non-violence practice and the virtue of expressing love towards the entire creation of Allah. The participation of such a spiritual experience promotes a strong spiritual attitude subjected to mankind. This is the social and spiritual

experience that is maintained for many years. This is a practical model of the religious harmony which is needed to preserve in the curriculum of the academic institution and transform good behaviors' to our future generations.

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