

EXPLORING THREATS TO SUFISM IN THE AGE OF COMMERCIALIZATION: QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Shaheer Ellahi Khan¹, Dr. Abid Ghafoor Chaudhry², Aftab Ahmed³, Nida Khan⁴

¹Anthropologist, Islamabad, ²Incharge Department of Anthropology, PMAS-Arid Agriculture University Rawalpindi,

³Anthropologist, Pakistan Association of Anthropology, Islamabad, ⁴Economist, Association for Social Development Islamabad

Corresponding Author's Email: huda.aftab@gmail.com

ABSTRACT : *The purpose of study was to find out the perceived ideology of Sufism in Pakistan and also to explore the relationship between the ideologies of Sufism and the issues of rapid commercialization perceived by the devotees, visitors and shrine managers. For this purpose the data was purposively collected from the folks through interviews and group discussions by using semi-structured questionnaire. The study is qualitative in nature; recommendations and conclusion are based on the perception of respondents that have been presented in the study. Around 75 respondents were interviewed through an interview guide under different categories over a period of six months. The key informants helped in addressing a lot of terms, expressions and purpose of the rituals and spiritual ceremonies along with the importance, currently required security measures and changing trends in the behavior, approach, application, wisdom and ideology of Sufism.*

Key Words: Sufism, Tasawwuf, Shariat, Aulia Allah, Sufi

INTRODUCTION

In Arabic and Persian, there are many terms for Muslim mystics with distinct and sometime contradictory meanings, all of which are commonly known as the word Sufism [1] which embraces the philosophy and practices in Islam which aim at direct communion between God and Man [2]. The traditional Sufi terminology defines it as the Science of certainty [3].

Sufism is an impossible task according to author but it is usually known as *Tasawwuf*. *Shariat* talks more about external practices and more like extrinsic matters and virtues of the religion. Sufism explores the intrinsic virtues and human devotion internally for the Almighty. *Shariat* and Sufism encompass gratitude and devotion to the Almighty. While *Shariat* enforces *Mazhab* which is the ritual part of Islam, Sufism works over *Deen* (Religion) which is like essence [4].

The explanation of Sufism will remain incomplete if the explanation of Sufi shrines is left out as the shrines are deeply connected with the Sufi salasul (spiritual orders), and were established and named after some of the leading Aulia Allah (Sufi friends of God), and when the Sufi completed his spiritual training and was commissioned as a deputy of his sheikh to guide others, he would establish a *khanqah* of his own, usually at his sheikh's tomb, his own adobe or whatever other locality he is entrusted with. He would devote himself full to the mission of the spiritual purification of his Murids (disciples) to the same goal which he had reached, controlling directly, controlling, directly checking, correcting and elevating the seekers up to the end of his life. His trainees include not only the elites but the general masses as well. He was the guiding sheikh of the entire area for preaching Islam and looking after the religious, social, educational and spiritual progress of the people in general. He would often run Islamic madrasas and was often himself a teacher. His was a fulltime job and being unable to earn his livelihood, he sometimes lived in object poverty and extreme austerity. This has mistakenly

been given the name if deliberate renunciation by the opponents of Sufism. The phenomena of *URS* have a special significance and importance in the world of Islam. It is not only a festival for social gathering and exchange of ideas with a recreational flavor but it is also an occasion for intense spiritual training. People from far and wide come to pay homage to spiritual benefactor, recite *fatiah* for his soul and flock around the grave for spiritual inspiration. Now because the departed soul himself is the recipient of enhanced favor and blessings characteristics of this occasion, he is in bountiful mood and bestows more and more favors on his people, giving special preference to the elite engaged in the arduous spiritual journey [5, 6].

Sufism, is a term which is notoriously difficult to be defined, it reflects the form taken by Western scholars attempts to order and understand the complexities of Islam and the Muslim world, as much as it points the realities the thought processes, ritual practices, political strategies and modes of engagement, with the wider world of those Muslims who are tempted to define reform minded or Sufi. Sufism has also been defined as Islam's mystical strain, Sufi thought places greater emphasis on the possibility of their being lived and experienced relationship between the believer and the God. However the term in contrast is reformism, this refers to the projects which seek to bring Muslim and practices closer to the Islamic doctrinal perceptions [5, 7].

It was further stated that the distinction between Sufism and reform minded Islam also inform much writing on Pakistan. Pakistan's city are home to some of the most vibrant Sufi shrines in the Muslim world and their annual gatherings that celebrate the death of the saint in whose name these are founded draw thousands of devotees, and increasingly, western journalists. At the same time Pakistani madrasas, or religious seminaries, form one of the most important networks for the transmission of the reform-minded forms of Islamic thoughts and learning in the world today. As number of Islam specialists have noticed, distinguishing between the different ways of being Muslims as being good

or bad ignores the complexity of historical and ongoing interaction between reform-minded and Sufi derived from the Muslim thoughts and identity. It also ignores the internal complexity, divisions and conflicts within these different dimensions of Islamic traditions. Exploring the complexity of everyday Muslim life challenges the relevance of such modes of categorizing Pakistani Muslims. Yet like the fundamentalists the challenge, the policy makers who advance such simplistic understandings of the contours of Muslim thinking and identity in the world today remains resistant to having their grand scheme fractured by the complexity on the everyday [5].

Muslims are ordained to maintain a just balance between extremism views of all hues, advising goodly conduct and discouraging evil ways. They further explored that Dr. Muhammad Iqbal beside being the national poet was a philosopher, a mystic in the true spirit of Islam, both a visionary man and observant of the practical world, Iqbal came closer to apprehending the true spirit of Islam and the Quran than most Muslims in the last few centuries where he also delivered a series of renowned lectures entitled "The Reconstruction of Religious Thoughts in Islam" for International and Muslim audience to achieve the concept of "One Ummah", yet in contemporary Muslim world including Pakistan, we witness literalist and extremist dreamers, quite detached from reality, pursuing the creation of a unitary Ummah through violence, bloodshed, coercion, sabotage and brainwashing on false and misleading sectarian belief systems and misinterpretation of Quranic edicts [8].

Another incident where revenge of Pakistani forces attacks against Taliban was taken by targeting the Sufi Shrine of Rahman Baba. Though practices and verses of Rahman Baba are widely known in whole province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Same article quotes New York Times in which they prophesize that America demands a stable and non extremist democracy in Pakistan. That can only be lead by mild and strong liberal values of Sufism. While in the month of June 2008 Pakistan Sufi Advisory council was called, in order to combat and to educate the extremist form of Islam taking birth in Pakistan. The Taliban hitting Sufi shrines is still an anonymous question that why war against terrorism revenge is taken by hitting the Sufi Shrine of Saints, who delivered nothing except the message of love and peace. 2003 RAND report encourages strategy to protect and serve Barelwi school of thought to encourage Sufism against the Pashtun Taliban in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. As Taliban are strongly protected by the orthodox Deobandi school of thought. To mild the situation and to encourage Sufism Barelwi thought were required which were more indigenous and mild. Same article of Sarkis Pogossian explores that this war is actually against any third force, rather Islamic versus Islamic are in the battle field how Taliban are damaging the Sufi Shrines and scaring by such consequences to the people who practice Sufi practices. Not only Pakistan but also in Somalia the Sufi shrines are damaged by Al-Shabaab and Al Shabaab is taking serious revenge from Sufi Muslims

even in Somalia. Later Al Shabaab claimed that they will not support any Sufi who worship graves [3].

METHODS

The present qualitative study has been designed to focus on exploring the contemporary Sufi ideology in the age of commercialization and how it creates an overall impact on the culture of shrines. The study was conducted on the shrines of Hazrat Syed Sakhi Mehmood Badshah and Hazrat Imam Bari situated in the heart of Islamabad (name as Aabpara and Noorpur Shahan respectively). Under the study, 75 interviews were conducted with the devotees, visitors and Auqaf managers at the shrine by selecting through purposive sampling method. The qualitative findings were then transcribed and are explained in the discussion of the respondents.

RESULTS

Table 1. Is Sufism Commercialized?

Responses	Percentage
Yes	71%
No	28%
Missing Information	01%
Total	100%

Table 2. Is Commercialization of Sufism, a helpful tool against terrorism?

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	53	71%
No	21	28%
Missing Information	01	01%
Total	75	100%

The tables 1 and 2, clearly defines the perception related to commercialization of Sufism, 71% of the respondents believes that it has been commercialized, while answering most of the respondents shared that it is nothing bad to project Sufism through print and electronic media, and for them it is not even bad to earn out of it and strengthening of local shrines and Sufi ideologies.

Nearly 71% of the respondents also explained that this commercial aspect of Sufism has actually raised the voice of peace, harmony, tolerance and patience hence playing a major role to reduce terrorism not just at the grass root level but also at large scale.

Table 3. Who is commercializing Sufism?

Responses	Percentage
Government	13%
Media	35%
Sufis	28%
Other	03%
Missing Information	21%
Total	100%

The table 3, provides a better picture of how people see the trend of commercial Sufism, nearly 35% respondents shared that the Pakistani media is playing a major role to commercialize Sufism, on the other hand nearly 28% explained that it is the followers of Sufism and Sufis who are

commercializing it, Nearly all of the respondents has developed a mixed point of view about the cause of commercializing of Sufism, they shared that the commercialization has both positive and negative impact not just on the society but also how Sufism is generally perceived. A group of respondents explained that the fast pace of the world requires modern tools to be adopted and adapted, so there is nothing bad to use media to recover people from the trauma of massive attacks in different shrines and areas of Pakistan.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Most of the respondents believed that with the passage of time and happenings around the world, it is also changing the social values, practices, needs and ideology of Sufism, A respondent shared his point of view by arguing that there is no such thing as Modern Sufism or Sufism, It has always been equally modest and liberal in accepting valid changes and pace of the technology and Information. On the other hand respondents defined Sufism as one of the most traditional Islamic method which has strong cultural and ideological presence around the globe and can help reduce the psychological trauma of terrorism by offering peaceful teachings for everyone to gradually grow themselves in the art of accepting the differences and commonalities of humans and by offering a global wisdom of sharing the welfare approach for the poorest of the poor of the society.

As long as there is any element of reality attaching to the valid message for that world, a message which is real just because it comes from the Truth for, as the Islamic metaphysical doctrines teaches, Truth and reality are ultimately one [9].

Commercialization in Sufism

Most of the respondents' claims that it is for sure an era of commercialization and one has to market its skills, knowledge and expertise in order to grow within any society, like every other concept Sufism has been commercialized with the passage of time. On the other hand a respondent described it as "what is wrong in commercialization of Sufism, it can equally be helpful if market properly to rescue the society from hard ideological trends of claiming superior, claiming themselves as correct and others wrong, prevailing anger and leaving no space for tolerance and patience".

Another respondent defined the commercialization of Sufism as a negative trend and a competitive modern race which blurs the actual philosophy of Sufism, a respondent said that it is righteous to spread the message of peace and harmony but it should be in the veils of responsible behavior, another respondent shared that it is the general ongoing trend in Pakistan where every sect is trying to prove themselves correct and right by publishing biased literature, pamphlets and even sermons focusing entirely on the superiority of their respective sects hence leaving no space in the society to grow and think collectively.

Considering the importance of doctrinal works in the process of calming the mind, it is sad that as far as Islamic spirituality is concerned, few of its riches in this domain

have been translated into English in comparison with what one finds from Buddhist, Hindu and Taoist [10].

A respondent shared that the entire paradigm has been shifted since 9/11 where the media has been strengthened and people are mostly under the impact of what media portrays about any issue, a group of respondent also comes to a point where they are confused about the projection in media regarding any religious especially Sufism related issues, they said that the representatives who mostly represent or defend Sufi ideology about any past or ongoing issue are not any authority over the subject.

The khateeb of the shrine shared that the number of devotees are increasing everyday and at time the Jumma prayers arrangements needs to be stretched out on the road or now at the backyard of the shrine keeping in view the security measures. He also shares that we do preach sermons against the violent terrorism and the mechanism to reduce it by calming their nerves down through sharing the peaceful movements of Sufis of the past.

The custodian of Imam Bargah shared that Shia community being the minority has been targeted badly and violently in terrorist activities and they have lost number of people in past 5 years or so, Now we take it as a responsibility to print and publish the literature against it, he also shared that we invite special scholars who deliver research based sermons so the upcoming generation should realize the intensity of the situation, he also explained that we strictly prohibit any sermon which triggers hatred or violence within the community and devotees of the shrine.

Most of the respondent believe that it is very important to launch a TV campaign where a number of scholars should be invited to preach correctly and collectively about Sufism and how it can powerfully demolish the ideology of killing people over the name of religion or sect instead of debating and fighting over the ongoing TV shows, Media should play a continuing role to craft the Sufi ideology in order to multiply peace and harmony within the Pakistani society.

REFERENCES

1. Carl. W. Ernst), *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*. Shambhala publications, inc. (1997).
2. Khanam. F (2006), *A simple guide to Sufism*. Goodword books, New Delhi.
3. Sufi and Neocons (2009). <http://ww4report.com/node/7502>
4. Rabbani, W. B. *Islamic Sufism*. Al-Faisal Nashran, Urdu Bazar, Lahore.(2005).
5. M. Marsden, *Islam and society in Pakistan*. Pp 13-14(2010).
6. Baldock. J. *The essence of Sufism*. Arcturus Publishing limited. London. (2004).
7. Dehlvi. S. *Sufism; The heart of Islam*. Thomson Press, New Delhi, India. (2009).
8. Hali. M. S *The Making of a Suicide Bomber*. *Criterion* January/March., **6**(1): 57-73, (2011),
9. Nasr. S. H. (2005), *Living Sufism*. Sohail Academy, Lahore, Pakistan.
10. Michon. J. L & Gaetani. R. *Shirkat Printing Press, Lahore, Pakistan*. (2007).