



ANALYSIS OF URS OF LAL SHAHBAZ QALANDAR: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Mela, Fair or Festival is one of the key cultural phenomena in the Indian Subcontinent. Throughout the centuries, it has been an integral part of the Indian society. One can see various types of Melas such as cultural, religious, musical and others in the Sindhi society as well. Various introductory studies have put forward their analysis on the Melas. However, it has been important to look at the Mela from the Feminist point of View. This research article focuses on the Mela which is held on the Urs of Qalandar Lal Shahbaz whose shrine is situated in Sehwan, Sindh from Feminist perspective. This research analyses the key elements of the Urs of Lal Shahbaz and looks at the Feminist theory with the framework of women participation. Women for various reasons have participated in the Urs of Lal Shahbaz. This research is inclined towards that part of Urs. This research is interdisciplinary and uses the qualitative method. Primary and secondary sources have been used to support the research work.

Keywords: *Lower-Class Women, Patriarchy, Sufism, Urs*

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1. Introduction

Sindhi society is deeply integrated in the thoughts of Sufism (Schimmel, 1970) because of this viable integration, each and every component of this society has been affected, influenced or impacted by it. Sindhi Women almost make up half of the Sindh's population (Statistics, 2023) that, too, in various ways have taken part in this phenomenon. Women for multiple reasons such as *Ziyarat*, paying homage, entertainment, dua, desire, Dhamaal and etc. visit shrines of the Sufis. However, most of the women who pay visit to the shrines belong to the lower class of the societal hierarchy.

As, Sindh is home to multiple Sufi shrines, some of those shrines are prominent. One of those Sufis is Lal Qalandar Shahbaz. The Urs or Annual fair of Lal Qalandar Shahbaz is celebrated on the date of eighteenth of Shahban, the eighth month of Islamic Calendar. Pilgrims around the Pakistan and neighboring countries come to pay him the homage. Although shrines, Sufi activities or paying homage to the Sufis is male-centric, however, a vast number of women have been celebrating it as well for various reasons. This paper argues that women who belong to the lower class of the society mostly pay visit to the shrines of the Sufis because they have limited resources. Throughout the years, women have been systematically oppressed in this society. Therefore, the avenues and other options for the well-being of the women are limited.

This research paper, thus, analyses the participation of the women pilgrims who come and pay homage to the Lal Qalandar. My main concern in this paper deals with the feminist idea of intersectionality that most of the women who come to the Urs are deprived. Most of these women belong to either lower or middle class. Most of these women are superstitious; these superstitions may or may not come under the flag of the religion Islam or Hinduism.

2. Literature Review

A number of streams of knowledge have been developed on the topic of fairs at shrines or religious and sacred fairs. Although, not every stream has dealt with the topic of the women and shrine fairs. This extensive survey of the literature has mentioned some recent publications on the fairs and would try to find the knowledge gaps therefore to situate this work of the research.

A very recent study shows that people join the sacred mela for multiple reasons such as religious or non-religious activities. This qualitative research shows that the people present at such a sacred mela came for their own affinities rather than the religious purpose only (Ruback, Pandey, & Kohli, 2008). This qualitative and quantitative study is the overall perceptions of the people who joined the Mela. Rather than focusing on the feminine members of the society.

Another scholar shows that how a Mela changes with the time. The scholar argues that with time the Hindu religiousness is rooted in the antiquity rather than the

change of the time, which seems meaningless to the outsiders (non-Hindus), however, with time, this large Mela has become a government-controlled mass religious festival (Lotchefeld, 2004). Furthermore, this notion has been challenged by the devout adherents of the religion. This research article deals with the idea of change in a religious setting of a sacred Mela.

Another book chapter also deals with the Kumbha Mela. However, in this chapter the arguments are different. The author argues that in various ways one can note that in a particular Mela or fair, certain elements are visible and some are invisible. However, both of these elements' impact, affect and alter the meaning of the sacred mela. Accounting for example photographers and the tourism point, author argues that there are numerous layers through which one can perceive the Mela or any fair (Maclean, 2008). Sometimes, the *Urs* is also politicized by the state or governments. The most important stream of the knowledge in this regard comes from the author Alex Philippon. He argues that the *Urs* in Pakistan has been nationalized for the national integrity of the state and its members (Philippon, 2012). The argument of the author is strong in political spectrum. However, to add on the further information, this article would look into the social factors that have influenced the epistemology of the *Urs*.

The other authors have also noted about the inter-religious harmony found at shrines or *Urs* of the Sufis. In the same procedure, author has noted the inter-religious harmony between Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir at the Shrines of the Sufis (Mir, 2012). This same inter-religious harmony can be found at the *Dargah* of Ajmer, Shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, Delhi Uderolal, Qalandar Lal Shahbaz and others. Last but not least in this survey of literature, there is knowledge that people follow their religion according to their socio-cultural setting in which they have grown up (Choudhary, 2010). This has been noted in almost every society of the world. The author has explicitly mentioned that Sufism flourished in the Punjab as its beliefs and practices were nearer to the basic nature of the social relationships in the Punjabi society - both being hierarchical in nature. Besides that, Sufism was flexible in its approach, therefore, people could practice it according to their social and professional life (Choudhary, 2010). By analysing this thorough survey of literature, one can note that the less has been written on the participation of the women at the shrine *Urs* or particularly lower-class women. This study, therefore, fills the gap of that knowledge by looking at the shrine of Hazrat Lal Qalandar Shahbaz. By locating some of the prominent reasons of the women participation at the Shrine, it would be established in the research and it will contribute in the already existing literature of the *Urs*, shrines, Sufism and women.

3. Methodology

This research is a work of qualitative research. The researcher has used various primary and secondary sources. In primary sources, I have done interviews with Syed and

Non-Syed Women. Newspapers, documents and books have also been used to back my argument. On the other hand, in secondary sources, I have used research articles, essays and books. To conduct this research essay, I have applied the theory of Feminism. Although, the theory of feminism is not a single idea. It is an umbrella term for various ideologies concerning gender (Beasley, 1999). In particular, I have used the theory of intersectionality in feminism (Crenshaw, 1989). However, the approach of writing this research paper is anthropological with reference to disciplines such as history, art history and sociology. The indigenous scholarship on the discourse of feminism is still growing in South Asia. Voices from the different dimensions are coming at front in academia, to understand the agency of women in Indian, Pakistani and other South Asian regions. This research paper focuses on the women in light of shrine Urs, religion and Sufism. Although, this research contributes to the shrine literature, however, in a major scope this study falls into the paradigm of the feminist discourse as well. A very less literature is available when it comes to the intersectionality of Sufism and women. However, when we study shrines and feminine body, we are left with no studies. As this society is largely influenced by the shrines, it has become necessary to look into the unheard and unseen matters of the shrines as well. Therefore, this research will benefit not only to the researchers of the Sufism, Shrines, religion, history, culture, politics but also to the feminist voices of the Sindh, Pakistan, South Asia and the world. Finally, this research will also pave way forward for the women and gender studies to look further into the account.

3.1. Understanding the Feminist Approach

Mela is a type of social gathering in the South Asia. In English language, the word fair is used which has roots in the Latin language (Dey, 2023). The fairs and Mela have their own importance in the society. From exporting importing goods to recreation, entertainment, there have been various important factors aligned with fairs around the world. In South Asia, most of the times mela are organized at the eve of any festival or event. Most of the times, these festivals are either related to religious or cultural setting. The mela have been also evolved throughout the time. Now a days, these mela are also theme-based promoting any idea, culture or art. In Pakistani society, as well, mela are held under the activities of the religion or culture. Most prominently, the Mela of Urs of different Pirs at their shrines are famous around the whole country.

Urs particularly is held over the shrines. It is important religious festival among the Sunni and Shia Muslims alike. People attend the Urs ceremonies from the day first to last. Mostly the Urs is held for the three days in the South Asian context. Pnina Werbner explains Urs as, “The ‘urs is both a ritual and a giant popular religious festival. It is also the hub of the organizational power of a Sufi regional cult, underpinning its reproduction and enabling its continued geographical extension. These three aspects of the ‘urs: ritual,

popular cultural, and organizational, are all essentially intertwined. (Werbner, 2012)” Therefore, it is important to consider the cultural and organizational importance of the Urs.

The Urs or mela of Hazrat Qalandar Lal Shahbaz is also equally famous and is visited by a number of people annually. Men and Women all over the Pakistan come and pay their homage to the Sufi saint. Although, people visit shrines for various reasons but still the connection of females visiting the shrines has been overlooked or has not been documented yet. The blurry situation of this whole scenario is cleared in the following passages. Beginning with the short introduction of the Sufi Saint, I have written some paragraphs which explicitly answer to the question that why do women participate in the Urs of Hazrat Lal Qalandar Shahbaz in large numbers.

3.2. Biography of Hazrat Lal Qalandar Shahbaz

Hazrat Lal Qalandar Shahbaz was basically from Marwand, Sistan present-day Afghanistan. His original name is still not clear, although many believe that his original name was Usman. He was born in the year of 1274 AD. He was a contemporary of Mualana Jalal-ud-din Rumi. He has been reverend by his devotees as a Sufi saint, poet and Dervish. He had travelled extensively and finally he settled in Sindh’s region called Sehwan. After he died, a shrine was built over his grave. He is also called *Jhooley Lal* which means “Red Bridegroom” (Kugle, 2007). People from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh come and visit his shrine when his Urs is held annually (In all its glory, Qalandar's urs culminates in Sehwan, 2017). His shrine has been a central point for the *Malangs* and *Qalanadris*. His followers come to his shrine for the sake of purity, prayers and veneration and other purposes as well. However, women followers of Qalandar mostly which belong to the lower class come here for various purposes such as *Dua* and desire, recreation and entertainment, and Dhamaal and Supernatural Reasons.

3.3. Dua and Desire

One of the most important reasons for which women pay visit to Shrines deal with the desire of having child. Religious women have been taught in the patriarchal society that if you’re childless, you may get a child especially a baby boy from visiting the shrines. While conversing with one of the Sindhi Feminist activists, Maham S. Hakro, it came to realization that most women have been either conditioned or persuaded in one or another way that they may get rid of childlessness if they pay visit to a local or famous shrine or Dargah such as Dargah of Qalandar Lal Shahbaz or Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (Hakro, 2024). This phenomenon has been noted in almost every other household that belongs to the lower class of the society. This phenomenon was also reassured by Miss Hakro. She further added, “This is also related to the class to which woman belongs. It is most likely observed that women who are deprived of education and belong to lower or lower middle class in the economic spectrum, are most likely to pay visit Dargah or Shrines (Hakro, 2024).” However, in rare cases, it may also be seen that this is also practiced by women

belonging to upper middle class and elite class (Werbner, 2012). Moreover, this phenomenon is not only limited to childlessness, the same is practiced in following cases;

- Unable to find a perfect spouse (eligible bachelor)
- To get rid of domestic violence
- Cure for illness
- Domestic issues related to the in-laws
- Economic issues (mostly related to the male spouse)

3.4. Recreation and Entertainment

It may be observed that in most of the patriarchal societies the gathering avenues are limited for women. Due to this reason, women tend to gather at or around shrines. This is true that most patriarchal societies are also conservative and religious. The only relaxation or self-time that women can have is in the name of religious activities. Thus, women gather at the shrine of Qalandar Lal Shahbaz in the name of *Sukh*. One of the members of Syed Family, and also Art History Scholar said that *Sukh* is the prominent leisure activity of most of the villager women. These women find solace or entertainment in this activity. The young women will gather around each other and will travel in the name of the religion and they in this sense would not be judged by their male counterparts as well. Thus, one may see that mostly women of the rural areas keep on practicing it. (Alvi, 2024). The event of *Sukh* is prominent among the rural women. On a larger spectrum, this practice is only limited to the lower-class women. The shrine of Qalandar Lal Shahbaz is annually packed with these activities. Apart from the *Sukh*, Women also participate in the annual *Urs* of the Lal Qalandar Shahbaz with the same spirit of recreation, enjoyment and entertainment (Alvi, 2024). It may be noted that most of these women are not completely aware of the religious education. However, they have been told that it is good to pay visit to the shrine in the name of spirituality. Therefore, they are not adjudicated by anyone. In a nutshell, it may be asserted that to avoid the judgement of the male family members, they visit the shrine at the time of *Urs* with their own extended family.

3.5. Dhamal and Supernatural Reasons

Before coming to the actual idea of ‘Dhamal’, it is vital to understand the society where supernatural elements are believed under the scope of religion. Islamic societies believe in the supernatural. In only South Asia 77 percentage of the people believe in the Jinn and 55 percentage of the people believe in the spiritual healers (Other Beliefs and Practices, 2012). Even in Quran and Hadith, it has been mentioned that witchcraft and sorcery exists (Quran 2:102) (Sahih Bukhari 54:490). Now, it has been noted that in Pakistani Society most of the people believe that a body of man or woman may be possessed by any Jinn at any time. Although recent scientific studies has proved that it is not Jinn or any kind of other supernatural deity but psychological issues. This research work does not deal with this debate, therefore, it would stick with the topic of supernatural

issues in the women. Though, most of the people get affected by this issue, however, the victims of this problem are mostly women.

What is the idea of Dhamal? Dhamal, in the words of Boivin, is the ecstatic dance performed in his dargah, and his followers think it is the genuine *zikr*, where the aim is to allow the performer to merge with Lal Shahbaz, and through him, with God (Boivin, 2020). Although it may not have been part of the Sufi Islam, but it was added after the Sufi poetry and the life of the Sufi saints, to the Sufi paradigm, the above author has added (Boivin, 2020). Dhamal can be performed under the guidance of *Murshid* or Master or it may be done freely without any guidance. However, the goal remains same to achieve the ecstasy.

The relation of the Dhamal, supernatural and women may seem complex but it is not entirely novel to the Sindhi or Pakistani understanding. Women who have been believed to be possessed by the Jinn do the Dhamal at the Shrine of Qalandar. These women entirely belong to the poor or middle classes. Parents or their male members of the family allow their women to do the Dhamal without any kind of reservation. It is believed that the possessed woman's Jinn or *Jinri* are followers or the devotees of the Qalandar, therefore, the doers of Dhamal may not be the person but the Jinn or Jinri respectively. Boivins last remarks soundly fit here. He remarks, "Through his description of the annual fair (melo), he incorporated the common people as a whole within the scope of Sufism. Murids are not literati; they are neither Sayyids nor members of any social elite. They are mainly peasants from Sindh, whether Muslim or Hindu. Sehwani also mentioned the ecstatic dance, for which he preferred to use the classical Arabic word *nawbat* rather than the vernacular *dhamal*. For Sehwani, there was no disjunction between Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, with his Persian origins, and the poor peasants from Sindh who walked barefoot for days to attend the melo, the annual fair. (Boivin, 2020)"

4. Conclusion

Finally, it has been noted that the South Asian society is deeply engraved into the Fairs mostly religious. The Islamic society held the fairs or Urs at the Shrines of Sufis which are attended by Hindus and as well as Muslims. Furthermore, the women participation at the Urs or shrines is almost equal or somewhat less than the male participation. However, the reasons for the participation of the women at the Urs were not explicit in the academia. Applying feminist discourse and framework here, one notes that women participate in the Urs or Shrine proceedings for various reasons. Prominently, these reasons are healing, Dua, entertainment, Dhamal etc. apart from this analysis one can also not that most of these women belonging to the lower spectrum of the society in terms of economic hierarchy. Although, it may be not finalized results of the women participation

at Urs. Lastly, further research is required to develop the feminist discourse alongside the lines of Sufism, Shrines and Patriarchy.

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