



ASSESSING THE REASONS FOR PILGRIMAGE TO SUFI SHRINES: ANALYZING THE REASONS IN THE CONTEXT OF POPULAR DARGAHS IN DELHI

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Abstract

The central ritual act of the cult of saints in South Asia is the pilgrimage to the tombs of the saints. This act is known as *ziyarat*. There are varied reasons for which pilgrims visit shrines, ranging from spiritual motives to material motives. This article aims at analyzing some of the main reasons behind shrine pilgrimage in the city of Delhi.

Key Words: *Ziyarat, Barakah, Shrine, Delhi, Pilgrimage, Visitation, Material, Spiritual.*

In popular Islam saints have always been venerated. Saints, in the past and even today, are considered to be bearers of divine bliss or *barakah*. They are also looked upon as intercessors and patrons of various social groups. Therefore, everything concerned with the relics of the Sufi saints carried the greatest spiritual authority within the most diverse strata of Indian society, irrespective of social status and religion. It is believed that *barakah* did not disappear after the death of the saint but continued to exist in the place where the saint was buried, and that the aura of his divine grace emanated from his tomb.

The central ritual act of the cult of saints was pilgrimage to their tombs or *ziyarat* literally meaning visit. *Ziyarat* is a form of visitation in which the devotees visit the shrine of a saint over and over again or sometimes only once to pray or ask for *mannat*. *Ziyarat* could be both individual and collective. The latter was taken recourse to in case of natural calamities in which a targeted intervention was required from the saint. Although most *ziyara* shrines are male shrines some are also that of women saints. Muslims make pilgrimages to the tombs of saints called *walis* out of devotion and also to make requests, and to seek the saint's blessings for the saints' spirits are said to remain close to the tombs in order to help those who visit them.

It is difficult to classify the reasons which take the visitors to the shrine as it can include anything from a spirit of inquisitiveness to a spiritual pilgrimage. However, the specific reasons of the devotees behind a pilgrimage can be classified into two groups: practical or material and spiritual or ritual. It is evident that most people visit a dargah in order to get their needs fulfilled, be it spiritual or material. As far as the practical or material factors are concerned, the devotee asks the saint to intercede between him and God in order to get a material need fulfilled; it can also be a spiritual need. Those whose prayers have been heard visit shrines in order to thank the saint whose intercession helped them in overcoming their problems.

Over the years, scholars who have dealt with the veneration of saints have agreed that this is the most important factor-asking for something and once it gets fulfilled going back to thank the saint. Thus, Goldziher says that people who are troubled by illness and poverty turn to a saint during times of distress.¹ According to Meer Hasan Ali, 'recovery from sickness, preservation from any grievous calamity, danger of other events which excites grateful feelings are the usual inducements to visit a dargah.'² S.A. Desidario Pinto has explained this phenomenon in the context of the famous dargah of Hazrat Nizam ad-din Auliya. He explains that people communicate verbally to the saint and pray for his intercession; some who cannot communicate verbally tie pieces of paper or pieces of cloth to the grilled wall of the shrine to request him for his intercession. These pieces of paper or cloth are tied in order to remind themselves of fulfilling their duty of coming back to the saint and thanking him for granting their request and also of their commitment to feed the poor or donate a stipulated sum of money in return.

Many people who visit these shrines seek cure from illness; many also seek cure from spirit possession. At the Hazrat Nizam ad-din dargah there is a separate enclosure for people who are possessed by spirits. Christian Troll opines that some people are brought to the dargah of Nizam ad-din by family members, well-wishers and friends to be exorcised from evil *jinn*s and spirits.³ At the dargah of Khwaja Qutub in Mehrauli there are people who specialize in the task of curing possession. Similarly, people afflicted with serious diseases also visit the shrines in order to get cured of their disease and lead a peaceful life. A few visitors at the shrine of Nizam ad-din also visit the shrine in order to bring about a favourable verdict in court

¹Goldziher, Ignaz, *Muslim Studies*, S. M. Stern (ed.), vol. II, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London 1966-71, p. 283.

² Ali, Meer Hasan, *Observations on the Mussalmans of India*, W. Crooke (ed.), London, 1974, p. 35

³ Troll, Christian (ed.), *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character, History and Significance*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1989, p. 115



cases they are fighting.⁴ Some shrines have wells in their vicinity and it is believed that drinking water from that well cures all illness. An example comes from the dargah of Aashiq Allah in Mehrauli which is visited by hordes of people on Thursdays (more than the other days). There is a well situated just opposite the main shrine and its water is said to have miraculous powers of healing people.

Many pilgrims or visitors visit these shrines in order to get amulets (*tawiz*) as a magical cure for all their problems. The importance of an amulet is recorded in the famous *mal'uzat* of Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya the *Fawaid al-Fuad*—"Once he recalled, Shaikh Farid ad-din may God sanctify his lofty secret – asked Shaykh al-Islam Qutub ad-din Bakhtiyar – may God illuminate his grave: 'People approach me asking for amulets. What should I do? Should I write and give them?' This work, replied Shaykh Qutub ad-din, rests neither in your hands nor in mine. The amulet is God's name; write and give them God's word!"⁵ As in the past, even today, people visit these shrines to get amulets written by *pirs* who are supposed to be well-versed with the word of God and write prayers on a piece of paper and give to the visitors. The *tawiz* (amulet) is supposed to be a quick-fix solution for all the problems being faced by a mortal being including illness, joblessness, infidelity, problems in conception (for women), among others.

Married women who are unable to bear children often visit these shrines to ask for *mannat* so that they conceive. This is a major element of devotion as far as women are concerned. Some shrines are visited specifically for this purpose and stories abound (though not corroborated by any medical or scientific observation) that women conceive after they visit these shrines and ask for *mannat*. Whether fact or fiction, it is true that this is a prime mover as far as women are concerned. Some shrines are also visited by people who desire to get their sons or daughters married but are unable to find suitable alliances. Asking for *mannat* at these shrines is supposed to bring good matrimonial alliances.

Apart from the material reasons, which are abundant in number, people also visit these shrines in order to achieve spiritual benefits. Some people sit in the shrine complex and contemplate and meditate in order to attain a certain level of spirituality. Some pilgrims develop a close bond of love with the saint and fix their heart and soul on the saint in order to achieve the right results. Some visitors also experience ecstasy, which is an outcome of their ecstatic union with the saint. Therefore, some people do visit these shrines for spiritual upliftment, though material reasons are more dominant.

Pilgrimage is also an act of penitence. Al-Hujwari in the *Kashf al-Mahjoob* regards pilgrimage as an act of mortification.⁶ Linked with this is the belief that there is a deep-rooted spiritual cause behind physical misfortune and pilgrimage as a penitential act can erase sin and counteract the misfortune. Therefore, people who visit the shrines also ask for pardon for the sins committed by them knowingly or unknowingly. The dead saint is supposed to hear their grievances and pardon them. The *maafi* sought by them for the misdeeds is granted by the saint.

Pilgrimage is also seen as an opportunity to escape social realities. Many people who visit shrines need an escape route—women who seek to get out the closed environs of their homes and men who seek to abjure their social roles for some time. The dargah gives them an opportunity to shed their inhibitions and this is most evident during the *sama* recitals where normal patterns of behaviour are, more often than not, abandoned and individuals lose conscious control of their bodies and enter a state of ecstasy. According to Mary Douglas this is an expression of social solidarity without differentiation.⁷ Therefore, at the shrines people are entitled to behave in a way which might be otherwise unacceptable. They are freed from the obligatory everyday constraints of status and their roles as responsible men and women. Within a shrine, the pilgrims live in a community governed by the principles of equality and brotherhood.

After having discussed the reasons behind shrine visitation it is now important to discuss a few specific examples from the shrines of Delhi. Field work conducted at various shrines across the city in order to ascertain the nature of visitation and other specific details revealed that most people perform the *ziyarat* in order to ask for *mannat*, while some visit these shrines just to pray.

For the purpose of this study, the visit to a shrine only to pray has been classified as a spiritual act while the act of asking for *mannat* has been classified as a material need which the visitors seek to get fulfilled. As far as the act of prayer is concerned, some respondents also claimed that they visit a shrine in order to attain peace of mind which has also been classified as an act

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 115.

⁵ Sijzi, Amir Hasan, *Fawaid al-Fuad*, translated in English by Bruce B. Lawrence, Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1992, p. 305.

⁶ Hujwari, Al, *Kashf al-Mahjoob*, translated in English by R.A. Nicholson, Zia ul-Quran Publications, Lahore, 2001, p. 328.

⁷ Douglas, Mary, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 111.



of spiritual well-being. The dargahs covered are located in South Delhi and are extremely popular among the local people who either live close to the shrine or visit the shrine on Thursdays or on other special days. The shrines selected for the purpose of analysis have remained popular over the years.

As far as the reasons for pilgrimage to a shrine is concerned, field work carried out at six shrines revealed the following information:

- At the dargah of Khwaja Qutub at Mehrauli out of the 38 respondents, 25 claimed that they visited the dargah only for spiritual purposes, that is, only to pray. The remaining 13 clearly stated that they visited the shrine in order to ask for *mannat* and to get a material need fulfilled.
- At the dargah of Hazrat Nizam ad-din Auliya out of the 40 respondents interviewed, 17 said that they visited the shrine only to pray, while 23 said that they visited the shrine to ask for *mannat*.
- At the dargah of Shaikh Nasir ad-din Chiragh i-Dehli out of the 32 respondents interviewed, 14 came to the shrine only to pray and for peace of mind, while 18 of them visited the shrine to ask for *mannat*.
- The dargah of Aashiq Allah at Mehrauli is visited by many people of Thursdays. Out of the 20 people interviewed, 10 said that they visited the dargah only to pray and to show their gratitude to the pir while the other 10 said that they visited the shrine in order to ask for *mannat*.
- At a dargah situated inside the Jahanpanah city forest (dargah of Syed Jalal ad-din Chishti Auliya) out of the 25 people interviewed, 18 said that they had come to ask for *mannat*, while the remaining 7 said that they had come to pray and read the *fatihah*.
- At the dargah of Syed Khwaja Shams ad-din Ataullah Pattey Shah, located close to Humayun's tomb, out of the 15 respondents interviewed, 10 said that they visited the dargah in order to ask for *mannat*, while 5 said that they visited the shrine to pay homage to the saint and pray.

Table: Reasons for Pilgrimage to a Shrine

S. No	Name of the Dargah	Number of People Interviewed	Mannat (Material Reason)	Prayer (Spiritual Factor)
1.	Khwaja Qutub, Mehrauli	38	13	25
2.	Hazrat Nizam ad-din Auliya	40	23	17
3.	Nasir ad-din Chiragh i-Dehli	32	18	14
4.	Aashiq Allah, Mehrauli	20	10	10
5.	Syed Jalal ad-din Chishti Auliya,	25	18	7
6.	Shams ad-din Ataullah Pattey Shah, near	15	10	5
7.	TOTAL	170	92	78

From an analysis of the data, thus, obtained it can be clearly ascertained that the main reason behind shrine visitation is both spiritual and material, in some cases people visit the shrine only for praying and for peace of mind and do not ask for any *mannat*, which means that the material factor is not supreme (as is evident in the case of the dargah of Khwaja Qutub at Mehrauli), while in most cases the main factor is material and people undertake *ziyarat* only to ask for a material favour from the saint. However, the material does not always take precedence over the spiritual as is evident from the data collected.

People do visit shrines to get something but this is not necessarily material, it is also a spiritual need that some of them try to get fulfilled by being in close proximity with the divine soul of the saint which is said to reside in his grave. The fact that people also visit these shrines in order to ask for pardon for the sins they might have committed is also an important factor to consider. Therefore, is no one dominant factor which determines shrine visitations by people. The causes are varied and people from different walks of life visit these shrines for different purposes. For some, it also means a break from social realities (as discussed earlier). The reasons for shrine visitations, therefore, cannot be treated as water-tight categorizations as there are diverse reasons because of which people visit these shrines. No one cause can take precedence over the other, though scholars in the past have argued that it is for material fulfillment that people visit shrines. This, however, is not true because material fulfillment is only one of the many causes, and not the most important one.