

Vibrant Public Space of Sufi Shrines: Do they Civilize and Democratize a Rude People?

Evolution and Regression of Public Space in Sufi Shrines of Pakistani Punjab

Amna Imam, Ph.D.

Pakistan Administrative Service, Higher Education Department, Lahore, Pakistan

Abstract

This paper charts new territories by exploring the civilizing and democratizing influences of public spaces of Sufi shrines. Using observational analysis of three urban Sufi shrines it shows that these influences are proportional to the perceptions of safety of public spaces of shrines.

Introduction

It is not uncommon to find those exposed to concepts of civic sense, governance and citizenship to consider the people of the Indian Sub-Continent as rude and uncivilized¹. It is also not uncommon to find the prescription of despotism to civilize these people².

The urban public spaces within Sufi shrines of Pakistan demonstrate that there is a more humane solution. They are visited by all, rich and poor³, old and young, men, Muslims and Non-Muslims, women and transgender. They are the throbbing, pulsating, anti-establishment, hubs of public interaction and expression of the artistic, literary, linguistic, and most importantly places of unrestrained expressions of the weak and vulnerable sides of individuals of all socio-economic strata and sexual orientations.

Traditionally the hubs of anti-establishment, non-violent, liberal and open communicative action, the Sufi shrines provide for open expressions of fears, misfortunes and vulnerabilities in a safe urban public space. This makes available a safe, uncensored and open communicative space for all and sundry to understand each other, democratize and civilize, interact and empathize. This allows for non-violent and tolerant venue of free expression of ideas, arts and faiths away from social restrictions, glass ceilings, prejudices and taboos. This research, therefore, argues that they present a viable alternative to despotism, for humanizing and civilizing its population.

This research employs observational analysis and compares the urban public spaces of Hazrat Bari Imam shrine in Islamabad (Potohar Region), Hazrat Data GanjBakhsh shrine in Lahore (center), and Hazrat Shah Rukn-e-Alam shrine in Multan (south), on the dimensions of

(1) gender relations, (2) diversity of expression and participation of faith, (3) courtesy, etiquette and levels of cooperative behavior among people, (4) permissibility and diversity of

verbal communicative action, (5) diversity of non-verbal communicative action and artistic expression.

Analysis showed that the most accessible and permissible urban public space for civilizing and democratizing as well as the perception of most safety, is found in the shrines of South Punjab, followed by Potohar Region and least in Central Punjab. It led to the conclusion that the civilizing and democratizing capacity of urban public spaces regresses and degenerates with increased perceived risks of terrorist attacks and vice versa.

¹ John Stuart Mill. "Representative Government" (1861)

² Ibid

Literature Review, Discussion and Hypotheses:

"A rude people, though in some degree alive to the benefits of civilised society, may be unable to practise the forbearance which it demands: their passions may be too violent, or their personal pride too exacting, to forego private conflict, and leave to the laws the avenging of their real or supposed wrongs. In such a case, a civilized government, to be really advantageous to them, will require to be in a considerable degree despotic: to be one over which they do not themselves exercise control, and which imposes a great amount of forcible restraint upon their actions⁴." (Mill, pg. 4)

Mill went on to state and further define the term "rude people" as,

"A people who are more disposed to shelter a criminal than to apprehend him; who, like the Hindoos, will perjure themselves to screen the man who has robbed them, rather than take trouble or expose themselves to vindictiveness by giving evidence against him; ... - require that the public authorities should be armed with much sterner powers of repression than elsewhere, since the first indispensable requisites of civilized life have nothing else to rest on⁵."(pg. 5)

Although there is some scholarly literature about Sufis and Sufi shrines in terms of their relationships with the-then rulers (Green, 2004)⁶, about the kind of demotic literature that is now disseminated from some Sufi shrines (Pemberton, 2002)⁷, the religious opinions about Sufi saints (Van der Veer, 1992)⁸, Sufi rituals, feminism, and female voice in those rituals (Abbas, 2002)⁹ (Badran, 1986)¹⁰, communal sensibilities created through these shrines (Gold, 2005)¹¹, and some discussion of these shrines as safe public spaces in the context of Iran, Egypt and Bangladesh (Canby, 2009)¹²(Shielke,

⁴ John Stuart Mill. "Representative Government" (1861)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Nile Green. "Stories of Saints and Sultans: Re-membering history at the Sufi shrines of Aurangabad". *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 2, Oxford University Press (2004)

⁷ Kelly Pemberton. "Islamic and Islamicizing Discourses: Ritual Performances, Didactic Texts, and the Reformist Challenge in the South Asian Sufi Milieu" *Annual of Urdu Studies* (2002)

⁸ Peter Van der Veer, "Playing or Praying: A Sufi Saint's Day in Surat", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 51, No.

3 (1992)

⁹Shameem Burney Abbas. "The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India", University of Texas Press (2002)

¹⁰ Margot Badran. "Islam, Patriarchy, and Feminism in the Middle East", Trends in History, (1986)

¹¹ Daniel Gold, "Sufi Shrines of Gwalior City: Communal Sensibilities and the Accessible Exotic under Hindu Rule". The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol. 64, No. 1 (2005)

2008)¹³(Uddin, 2006)¹⁴11; social and material reconstruction of urban space because of these Sufi shrines (Hancock and Srinivas, 2008)¹⁵.

However, little is published about the urban public space and its civilizing and democratizing effect of Sufi shrines in Pakistan and in particular the evolution and regression of civilizing and democratizing effects of these different Sufi shrines in Punjab due to terrorism and puritanical movement, which is ironically anti-establishment¹⁶, liberal, and equalizing¹⁷ in its theory.

This research attempts to respond to this lacuna in the literature.

It is a more or less agreed upon fact that Sufi shrines in Pakistani Punjab demonstrate open expressions of weaknesses, worldly needs, and vulnerabilities of weak and powerful¹⁸, rich and poor¹⁹, men and women²⁰, Muslims and non-Muslims alike²¹. They, therefore, on the one hand provide a unique and safe^{22, 23} meeting-point in public realm of socio-economic and gender groups, and on the other hand provide for a safe and open place for free flow of ideas and verbal, non-verbal and artistic expressions²⁴ away from social restrictions and fears. Thus they facilitate a kind of communicative action that binds the community together through norms of courtesy and tolerance encouraging civilized and democratic behavior.

Since all Sufi shrines of Pakistani Punjab afford safe urban public spaces²⁵, the civilizing and democratizing aspects of these shrines can be categorized into the following:

- (1) gender relations²⁶,
- (2) diversity of expression and participation of faith^{27, 28}

¹³ S Shielke, "Policing ambiguity: Muslim saints-day festivals and the moral geography of public space in Egypt", American Ethnologist, (2008)

¹⁴ Sufia Uddin, "In the company of Pirs: Making vows, receiving favors at Bangladeshi Sufi shrines", in Selva D. Raj and William Herman (eds.) Dealing with Deities: The ritual vow in South Asia. SUNY Press, (2006)

¹⁵ Mary Hancock and Smriti Srinivas, "Spaces of Modernity: Religion and the Urban in Asia and Africa". International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2008)

¹⁶ Nile Green. "Stories of Saints and Sultans: Re-membering history at the Sufi shrines of Aurangabad". Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 38, no. 2, Oxford University Press (2004)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Sheila Canby. "Shah „Abbas: The remaking of Iran". The British Museum Press (2009)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Shameem Burney Abbas. "The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India", University of Texas Press (2002)

²¹ Sheila Canby. "Shah „Abbas: The remaking of Iran". The British Museum Press (2009)

²² S Shielke, "Policing ambiguity: Muslim saints-day festivals and the moral geography of public space in Egypt", American Ethnologist, (2008)

²³ Sufia Uddin, "In the company of Pirs: Making vows, receiving favors at Bangladeshi Sufi shrines", in Selva D. Raj

and William Herman (eds.) *Dealing with Deities: The ritual vow in South Asia*. SUNY Press, (2006)

²⁴Shameem Burney Abbas. "The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India", University of Texas Press (2002)

²⁵Sheila Canby. "Shah „Abbas: The remaking of Iran". The British Museum Press (2009)

²⁶Kelly Pemberton. "Islamic and Islamicizing Discourses: Ritual Performances, Didactic Texts, and the Reformist Challenge in the South Asian Sufi Milieu" *Annual of Urdu Studies* (2002)

- (3) courtesy, etiquette²⁹ and levels of cooperative behavior among people,
- (4) permissibility and diversity of verbal communicative action^{30,31},
- (5) diversity of non-verbal communicative action^{32,33} and artistic expression^{34,35,36}.

Since some Sufi orders are more tolerant and liberal than the others which are civilizing and democratizing liberal values enumerated above may be observationally stronger at Sufi shrines of saints who belonged to more liberal orders.

Secondly, this paper hypothesizes that the since the civilizing and democratizing aspects of Sufi shrines occur in the safe urban public space provided by the Sufi shrines, therefore, in today's context of terrorism, the shrines where safety is perceived as given will have a stronger showing on the above-mentioned aspects as compared to shrines where safety is perceived as enforced.

The predominant feminine voice of Sufi saints³⁷ in their prose, poetry and rituals as being dominant to the male voice and emphasis on home as the center of religious practice³⁸, as well as patronage of Sufi shrines by women³⁹, in itself, promotes non-violent encouragement of places where subjectivity can, in an objective and reasoned manner, be openly discussed, laying bare the weakest vulnerabilities of human feelings. It also strongly encourages, embraces and celebrates diversity of creativity and creation, instead of feeling threatened by it. These aspects tend not only to a general more courteous behavior, more equitable gender relations, tolerance of diverse faiths and practices and overall permissibility of open communicative action – all of which are dimensions of civilized and democratic norms.

Sufi shrines encompass expressions of faith that embrace the two key sectarian streams of Islamic thought, of Shia and Sunni⁴⁰, as well as a diversity of faiths and expressions of faiths including those of politically rival Hindus and Muslims⁴¹, in the

²⁸ Daniel Gold, "Sufi Shrines of Gwalior City: Communal Sensibilities and the Accessible Exotic under Hindu Rule". *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (2005)

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Shameem Burney Abbas. "The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India", University of Texas Press (2002)

³¹ Nile Green. "Stories of Saints and Sultans: Re-membering history at the Sufi shrines of Aurangabad". *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 2, Oxford University Press (2004)

³² Sheila Canby. "Shah „Abbas: The remaking of Iran". The British Museum Press (2009)

³³ Shameem Burney Abbas. "The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India", University of Texas Press (2002)

³⁴ Sheila Canby. "Shah „Abbas: The remaking of Iran". The British Museum Press (2009)

³⁵ Shameem Burney Abbas. "The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India", University of Texas Press (2002)

³⁶ Nile Green. "Stories of Saints and Sultans: Re-membering history at the Sufi shrines of Aurangabad". *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 2, Oxford University Press (2004)

³⁷ Shameem Burney Abbas. "The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India", University of Texas Press (2002)

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Sheila Canby. "Shah „Abbas: The remaking of Iran". The British Museum Press (2009)

⁴⁰ Sheila Canby. "Shah „Abbas: The remaking of Iran". The British Museum Press (2009)

⁴¹ Daniel Gold, "Sufi Shrines of Gwalior City: Communal Sensibilities and the Accessible Exotic under Hindu Rule". *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (2005)

tolerant and popular urban public space of Sufi shrines⁴² made possible by the simultaneous patronage of the weak and powerful, the ruler and the ruled and the rich and the poor, the old and the young⁴³, and the oral and the textual⁴⁴. Thus by re-defining the urban public space, through mediums of expression, Sufi shrines bring elite artistic expressions⁴⁵ at the free accessibility level of the common people, bridging the gap between haves and have-nots, and thus contributing to a participatory and the democratic aspect of public sensibilities.

Discussing the low cost religious literature available at different Sufi shrines in India, Pemberton⁴⁶ spoke of the diversity of opinions expressed in them, from rituals and right and wrong, to manners and philosophy. It found that most of this literature advocates tolerance and a balanced, reasoned, and middle-of-the-road approach to religion⁴⁷. It seems to encourage independent thinking, charting new territories, sincerity of purpose and rejection of hypocrisy. While some forms of Sufism took militaristic and debating aspects, majority was reform oriented and inward looking with primary focus on either the legalistic or mystical aspects of Islam; but never losing sight of the mystical. The nineteenth century reformist Punjab revolved around piri-mureedi, shrine and the urs⁴⁸. Some literature tends to increase sectarianism among Muslims, some were more permissible of assimilation of local cultures and rural Islam such as the Chishtia order of Sufism versus others such as Sarwari Qadri which emphasized the fundamentals of Islam or Suhawardi order of Sufi order which promoted conservative piety. All, however, have something to say about the role of women⁴⁹ and on etiquette⁵⁰ and courtesy.

Moreover, the traditions of bare-footed visits of powerful kings and nobles to the Dargahs and shrines⁵¹ of Sufi saints, intermingling of various socio-economic, gender, and sexual orientation groups on equitable terms within the Sufi shrines engender a kind of democratic equality, tolerance and courtesy that cannot be forced upon by despotic means. Green⁵² (2004) speaks of the role of cultural continuity played by the physical presence of Sufi shrines which engenders oral transmission of traditions, and help build a socially constructed, participative narrative with deep liberal, political implications for the urban Muslim minority of Aurangabad, India, as well as the rural Hindu majority, emphasizing the role of verbal communication instilled through Sufi shrines. Sufi shrines embody the power of a Sufi saint to defy the powerful⁵³ and usually elitist king, a kind of

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Nile Green. "Stories of Saints and Sultans: Re-membering history at the Sufi shrines of Aurangabad". *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 2, Oxford University Press (2004)

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Sheila Canby. "Shah „Abbas: The remaking of Iran". The British Museum Press (2009)

⁴⁶ Kelly Pemberton. "Islamic and Islamicizing Discourses: Ritual Performances, Didactic Texts, and the Reformist Challenge in the South Asian Sufi Milieu" *Annual of Urdu Studies* (2002)

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Sheila Canby. "Shah „Abbas: The remaking of Iran". The British Museum Press (2009)

⁵² Nile Green. "Stories of Saints and Sultans: Re-membering history at the Sufi shrines of Aurangabad". *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 2, Oxford University Press (2004)

⁵³ Ibid

counter power and counter, popular narrative as opposed to the state sponsored discourse. This naturally instills free flow of verbal and non-verbal communication of ideas, lexis and artistic expression of self actualization, sovereignty and power to change the social constructs through popular verbal and non-verbal discourse including artistic expression, glimpse of the life of the “other”– an important element of grassroots democratization.

Methodology:

I used the method of observational study in the three Sufi Shrines of (1) Hazrat Bari Imam in the Potohar region, (2) Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore in Central Punjab, and (3) Hazrat Shah Rukn-e-Alam in Multan in South Punjabn along the five dimensions discussed above, i.e. (1) gender relations, (2) diversity of expression and participation of faiths, (3) courtesy, etiquette, and levels of cooperative behavior among people, (4) permissibility and diversity of verbal communicative action, (5) diversity of non-verbal communicative action and artistic expression. Within these dimensions, the following were studied:

Table 1: Categories and Sub-Categories Studied for the Civilizing and Democratizing Dimensions of Sufi Shrines in the Potohar Region, Central Punjab and Southern Punjab:

	Categories	Sub-Categories
S. No.		
1	Gender Relations	Ratio of women pilgrims versus males
		Separate versus common enclosures for men and women
		Separate security entrances for men and women
		Presence of common open grounds for both males and females
		Occurrences of obvious harassment of women by men
		Dis-courteous conversations and interactions among former stranger men and women
2	Diversity of Expression and Participation of Faiths	Presence of non-Muslims in the shrines
		Favorable or secular descriptions of non-Muslims in narratives
		Lack of interest among pilgrims about the faith of other
3	Courtesy, Etiquette, and Levels of Cooperative Behavior Among People	Cooperation among strangers
		Occurrences of courteous conversations among former strangers
		Consideration for the time and space of others
		Verbal arguments
		Physical fights
4	Permissibility and Diversity of Verbal Communicative Action	Narratives
		Stories
		Conversations among people of different socio-economic background
		Conversations among people of different ethnic backgrounds
		Conversations among people of different faith backgrounds
		Conversations among people of different age groups
		Music rendition
		Poetry recitals
5	Diversity of Non-Verbal Communicative Action and Artistic Expression	Dance
		Architecture of shrines
		People of different socio-economic groups sharing the same space
		People of different ethnicities sharing the same space
		People of different age groups sharing the same space
		People of different genders sharing the same space

At least twenty visits were made to each of the three shrines. It was extremely difficult, if not impossible to count the exact number of men and women among the pilgrims, conversations and incidents of cooperation, therefore, a subjective estimation of the same was made.

Findings and Discussion:

The following table shows the findings of this observational study:

Table 2: Findings:

S. No.	Categories	Sub-Categories	Findings		
			Bari Imam	Data Ganj Bakhsh	Shah Rukn-e-Alam
1	Gender Relations	Ratio of women pilgrims versus males	Equal	Equal	Equal
		Separate versus common enclosures for men and women	Separate	Separate	Common
		Separate security entrances for men and women	Separate	Separate	Common
		Presence of common open grounds for both males and females	Common	Separate	Common
		Occurrences of obvious harassment of women by men	None	None	None
		Dis-courteous conversations and interactions among former stranger men and women	None	None	None
2	Diversity of Expression and Participation of Faiths	Presence of non-Muslims in the shrines	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Favorable or secular descriptions of non-Muslims in narratives	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Lack of interest among pilgrims about the faith of other	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Courtesy, Etiquette, and Levels of Cooperative Behavior Among People	Cooperation among strangers	Yes	Yes	Somewhat
		Occurrences of courteous conversations among former strangers	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Consideration for the time and space of others	Yes	Somewhat	Yes
		Verbal arguments	None	One	None
		Physical fights	None	None	None
4	Permissibility and Diversity of Verbal Communicative Action	Narratives	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Stories	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Conversations among people of different socio-economic background	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Conversations among people of different ethnic backgrounds	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Conversations among people of different faith backgrounds	Yes	Yes	Yes
		Conversations among people of different age groups	Yes	Somewhat	Yes
		Music rendition	Somewhat	None	Yes
		Poetry recitals	Somewhat	Yes	Yes
5	Diversity of Non-Verbal Communicative Action and Artistic Expression	Dance	Yes	No	Somewhat
		Architecture of shrines	Artistic	Artistic	Artistic
		People of different socio-economic groups sharing the same space	Yes	Yes	Yes
		People of different ethnicities sharing the same space	Yes	Yes	Yes
		People of different age groups sharing the same space	Yes	Yes	Yes
		People of different genders sharing the same space	Somewhat	No	Yes

All Sufi orders represent liberal and tolerant strains of Islamic faith; it was expected that the urban public space of shrines of Sufis who were adherents of more liberal orders would demonstrate higher levels of civilizing and democratizing environment and behavior along all the above mentioned categories. In this regard, it was expected that Chishti order being the most liberal, the shrine of Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh will demonstrate the highest degree of civilizing and democratizing categories, followed by the Sarwari Qadri order Sufi saint of Hazrat Bari Imam, and the shrine of Hazrat Rukn-e-Alam of Suharwardy (more conservative) order will be the last in showing elements of civilizing and democratizing behavior.

Surprisingly, the findings were completely opposite to the hypothesis. The shrine of Hazrat Shah Rukn-e-Alam whose Suharwardy order is the most conservative of the three Sufi order showed the presence of most categories of civilizing and democratizing urban public space, as shown in table 2 above. It was followed by the shrine of Hazrat Bari Imam, which was anyways expected to be somewhere in the middle of civilizing and democratizing categories. However, surprisingly, the shrine of Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh which was expected to have the highest degree of all civilizing and democratizing categories, showed the least amount of it.

This brings us to our second hypothesis which stated that enhanced perceptions of safety and risks of terrorist attacks will decrease the civilizing and democratizing of shrines.

In this regard, tightest security procedures resulting from perceptions of risks was observed at the shrine of Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh, followed by Hazrat Bari Imam and least of all at the shrine of Hazrat Shah Rukn-e-Alam. This corresponds directly with the presence of categories of civilizing and democratizing characteristics found at each of the shrine.

We can therefore claim that overall Sufi shrines demonstrate a high degree of liberal, open and free exchange of ideas, narratives and conversations among all kinds of members of the society, and hence promote civilizing and democratizing qualities in the society.

We can further claim that Sufi shrines are able to do so because they provide a safe urban public space free from unnecessary social restrictions and prejudices. The safer this urban public space is, the higher the possibility of civilizing and democratizing effects of a Sufi shrine and vice versa.

Conclusion and Implications for Practitioners of Public Administration and Researchers:

This research breaks new grounds by exploring the linkages between the civilizing and democratizing influences of urban public spaces of Sufi Shrines, by its observational study of three Sufi shrines in the urban centers of Islamabad, Lahore and Multan. It shows that the safe and tolerant urban public spaces of Sufi shrines help civilize and democratize a society and promote tolerance in the society. Practitioners of public administration can employ these findings to promote democratization process in the society.

It also has significant implications for research. Further research is needed for

rural public spaces of Sufi shrines. Further studies on the influence of current political narrative on the civilizing and democratizing influences of Sufi shrines will also contribute importantly to the body of existing literature.