

People's Behavior and Belief System about the Oblation Rituals at the Shrine of Shah Daulah in Gujrat, Pakistan

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Abstract

The current study aims to understand the motivations behind the devotees' visits and oblation rituals at the shrine of Shah Daulah in Gujrat Pakistan. Social construction theory has been employed to assess the knowledge, behavior and practices of people towards the oblation ritual. A qualitative research approach was applied to collected data with the use of purposive sampling technique to approach the relevant respondents. The target audience for the study was the people who visited the shrine and offered oblation rituals. The sample size comprises of 20 people including males and females. The study found that the socio-cognitive patterns play a vital role in the construction of the knowledge about the rituals concerning shrines. Hence, the visitors of the shrine learn the rituals related to shrine from their family, religion, literature and overall society. This construction strengthens their belief system and the other way around.

Keywords: Oblation, Beliefs, Sufi Shrine, Shah Daulah, Gujrat, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Shrines have a greater importance in shaping the religious, spiritual and cultural patterns of Pakistani society (Khan and Kalhoro, 2016). People hold in high esteem and the reverence towards shrines located across the country. Various shrines are visited with great veneration by the visitors and which donate money, perform oblation rituals, provide food (*Qangar*) and spend their time in cleaning and supporting other visitors as well (Amin, 2013). The shrine of Shah Daulah is famous for oblation rituals and the *rat* people (Patch, 1928:297). The real and full name of Shah Daulah is the Hazarat Kabir-Ud-Din Shah Daulah Daryai. Shah Daulah associated himself with the spiritual and religious education in the early days of his life (Miles, 1996). Shah Daulah spent his whole life on a mystical path by serving and enlightening the native people. He died in Gujrat in 1085 Hijri (1674 AD) and was buried there as well (Miles, 1996).

People have great reverence for him and thousands of devotees from various parts of the country regularly visit his shrine. There are many peculiar and wonderful beliefs which are attached with the shrine of Shah

Daulah (Ewens, 1903:330). Visiting shrines in many societies particularly in religiously proactive societies is an essential part of the life of individuals as they are socialized to do so. The devotees pay visits to the shrines in a bid to seek psychological resilience and relief from the ongoing life challenges caused by desires and deprivations (Farooq and Kayani, 2012:335).



Fig. 1 - Shrine of Hazrat Shah Daula, Gujrat—Pakistan (Photo by Author).

People strongly believe that if they perform peculiar practices at the shrine, in return they will get an instant cure for their problems. These practices may include oblations in many forms, including the bequest of anatomical ex-votos and idols to the shrine. They are convinced that such practices would benefit them for the treatment of ailments and physical disfunctions. They also believe that if they pray (*dua*) for the birth of a child on this shrine their wishes would also be accomplished. Therefore, it is of great interest to explore how behavioral patterns and belief systems centered on giving at shrines were developed in the context of the construction of knowledge, learning and realities. This study also seeks to identify the responsible components of the society which shape the belief system of the visitors of the shrine.

2. Statement of the Problem

The shrine of Shah Daulah is quite famous not only in the city of Gujrat, indeed, people from several other places also regularly visit and perform various rituals at the shrine. People associate many myths with the shrine of Shah Daulah and such myths continuously influence their behavior and belief system. The most prominent belief of the people towards the shrine of Shah Daulah is the performing of oblations (*charawa*) ritual for specific problems and diseases. Pakistani society is in a transitional phase. Since the modern knowledge and culture are replacing the traditional and long established norms and belief system. However, the devotees of this particular shrine are stuck-up with the old tradition and hence believe in the spiritual support provided to them by the Shah Daulah. They regularly visit this shrine and perform the specific rituals for the fulfillment of their desired needs and make afresh vows. The mechanism of constructing such knowledge is quite complex and it needs to be identified and investigated to trace out the development of the belief system of thoes people. This study contributes theoretically and practically to the existing body of literature about qualitative understanding of the process of construction of knowledge and social realities at the shrine under study.

3. The Reverence of Sufi Shrines

The shrine is considered as a very holy place since devotees strongly believe that spirituals leaders resting in shrines play a mediating role between the public and the divine forces. The visitation of these shrines is quite common in almost every culture and religion, including Islam. Especially when people feel and think that they are helpless and need some spiritual support from someone close to God for getting their voices heard (Tyson,1997:15), the reverence and devotion of the visitors towards the shrines become even more significant. This form of devotion is considered as a solid link between God, men and needs. The shrines of holy saints have been historically serving as a spiritual and welfare institution, and are sometimes in same complex with other institutions such as mosques and madrassas (Strothmann, 2013). The visitors develop a sacred relationship with the saints through obedience and submission before the shrine, and by serving and helping other visitors (Kurin,1983).

A larger number of people from the Pakistani society believe that the true saints are buried in the shrines and even after their death they are serving the humanity (Rozeenal, 2006). The shrines in Pakistan have become very normal and common places for travelers and visitors which consider the specific rituals worthy and necessary for the purification of the hearts and soul (Platteau, 2011). The present relationship between the seeker and the shrine is not a new one, rather it has its roots in Medieval Islam and with the time this culture became an essential part of Muslim societies (Sabra, 2013). Different kind of practices are attached rather these shrines throughout the world such as in Pakistan, India, Iraq, Iran, Syria etc. The shrines have become great religious and spiritual centers where visited on regular basis and sharing misfortunes, pray, and seek, relief (Choudhary, 2010).

Although shrines have great religious importance, with the passage of time, shrines have turned into a magnificent source of social and political powers as well (Khan and Sajid, 2011). Nevertheless, a large number of people pay regular visits on weekly, monthly, quarterly or annually basis to perform peculiar rituals to seek the peace of mind and remedy to their spiritual and physical ailments (Pirani, 2008:86). The visiting of the sacred places and the performance of oblation rituals at the shrine have traditionally been considered as a gracious and dignified act (Frembge, 2012).

The research on understanding the behavioral pattern with respect to the construction of knowledge and belief system about shrines is quite limited particularly in Pakistani perspective. Various studies have been conducted in both the quantitative and qualitative modes but most of them excluded the epistemological dimension of developing the knowledge, behavior and belief of the individuals regarding the shrines. This study aims to see the epistemological dimension of the individuals or the social actors in order to highlight how they learn to practice oblations and develop the belief system centered on the shrine of Shah Daulah.

4. Theoretical Framework

The socio-cognitive patterns play a vital role in shaping the perceptions, narratives, actions and the social behavior of the people. Therefore, the social constructivism (SC) was found to be the most relevant and appropriate approach which explains the behavioral patterns of the people

in extensive way. SC focuses on the non-material or ideational factors which effectively motivate the individuals towards the particular goals and objectives. Social construction theory believes that the reality is socially constructed in a social or cultural context. People by interacting with each other develop the perceptions of reality and construct the peculiar knowledge about the specific phenomena (Berger and Berger, 2003:13-21).

Hence, all the social realities, myths and stereotypes are constructed by the culture or the various agents of the society. The society plays a vital role in the process of socialization of the individuals. Individuals or the social actors learn step-by-step a composite culture including the social realities, myths and belief system and, later on, act accordingly (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). The visitors of the shrines with specific beliefs also learn and develop their beliefs from the prevailing culture. So, people visit the Shrine of Shah Daulah because the native culture believes, promotes and accepts the peculiar behavior toward this shrine.

The devotees had a strong faith in the ritual of oblation (*charawa*) which they acquired from the very society in which they live in. By performing such oblation related rituals they believe that their ailments shall be cured, they may be able to shatter miseries, the desire of having child could be fulfilled, the dysfunction of a body organ/part would be remedied, and so on. Such expectations are being fixed to the shrines through a systematic learning process in which individual actors, peers, and families are equally important in making the other people to fix their beliefs on the shrines and thus consequently the individuals also start performing the rituals peculiar to the shrines in a bid to get their personal fulfilled.

Similarly, various kind of beliefs have been constructed about the shrine of Shah Daulah by the local culture, agents of socialization and the literature, etc. If someone comes across any problem in his or her body, he/ she visits the shrine and buys a peculiar silver-made part of body and offers it as an oblation placing it in a specific box located at the shrine. The study proposes a conceptual framework that has been derived after careful and critical review of the existing literature on socialization and construction of the norms, values, social realities in relation to the shrine of Shah Daulah.

The framework presented in figure 2 determines the direction of this research. This framework endeavors to comprehend the multi-layer construction of the social reality with respect to the oblation rituals at the Shrine of Shah Daulah in Gujrat.

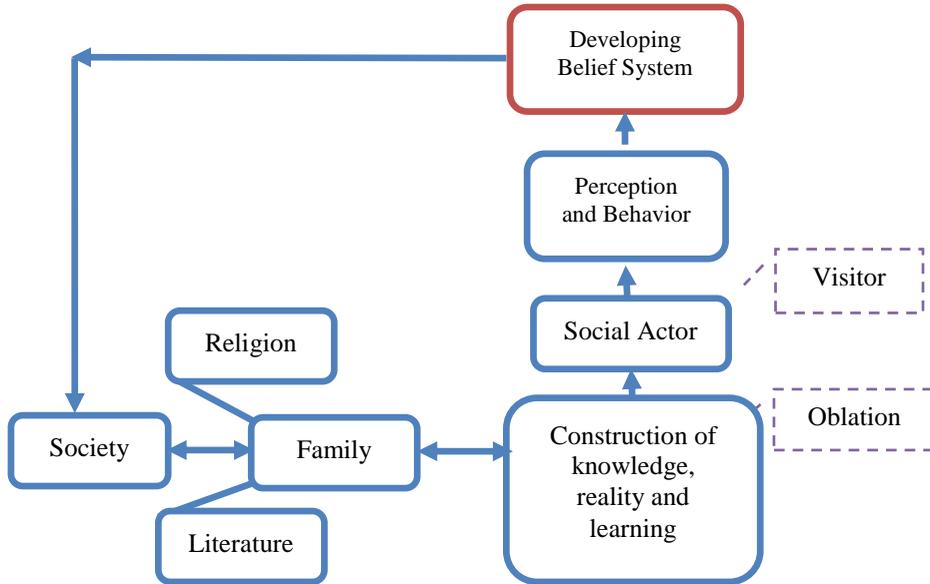


Fig. 2 - Social Construction of the Behaviors and Belief System about Shrines.

Without any doubt, the family plays a vital role in socialization and construction of the knowledge and social reality (like making of vow-*Mannat* and oblation ritual-*charawa*). However, the social reality has been constructed at various levels and the religion is another important institution in this regard. The religious beliefs have been developed, interpreted and promoted among the social actors (visitors). Social actors learn such behavior from the existing behavioral patterns and also practice their learning by visiting and endorsing that social reality. They play their role in further construction and dissemination of the social reality of making of vows and performance of oblation rituals. The continuity of this process at dogmatic and pragmatic level leads to the belief system. The belief system about the significance of the vow and oblation prevails and integrates into the multiple layers of society.



Fig. 3 - The inside view of the shrine (Photo by Author).

In the past people believed that infertile women which had a baby after having a vow (*mannat*) on the shrine, would given her new born baby to the shrine as oblation (*charawa*). This idea was also socially constructed. Now this perception, especially of the women, is changing and people do not value and consider the vow of oblation (*charawa*) of their first baby to the shrine. Now adays the use of idols have prevailed and mostly people use idols as oblation for any kind of problem. Thus, it is crucial to comprehend the process of the construction of such kind of knowledge; social realities are quite complex and must be understood by unfolding the multiple layers of the society. Specifically, traditionally a number of stories are available in literature and are transmitted through oral narration with the support of religious literature to educate and convince youngsters and new visitors.

5. Methodology

For the current study we used qualitative approach for the generation of the knowledge, description and explanation of the collected data. The

study gives an in-depth understanding and comprehensive underpinning about the belief system of the visitors of the shrine. The study was conducted at the shrine of Shah Daulah located at Gujrat city by following the technique of the purposive sampling for the selection of the respondents. This proved to be a quite suitable technique which directly helped in identifying the appropriate audiences and to collect the relevant data around the perceptions and belief system of the visitors of the shrine. The sample size of the study includes 20 people who visited the shrine for performance of oblation rituals. Therefore, the visiting devotees were the targeted audience in this study. The data was collected at primary level by using two approaches: interview and non-participatory observations.

Interview guide was designed to record and collect the perceptions, opinions, experience of the devotees about the shrine. All of the questions were open ended and less regulated except the demographic details of the respondents. Multiple questions were devised to assess the rational and belief systems of the visitors. For instance, why do they visit to the shrine and who convinced or inspired them to do so? Moreover, what is the purpose of the making of vows and performance of oblation rituals at the shrine? Similarly, the kind of vows and relation with the belief system were also investigated in order to get an extensive understanding about their rationale.

The interviews were conducted through face-to-face approach with the visiting devotees around the targeted issue. Since the nature of the issue is quite subjective, during the field work, the obtrusive and unobtrusive observations, interpretative approach and other techniques were undertaken by the researcher to gather the data and to validate the information collected through in-depth interviews. The ritual of oblation had been observed and recorded in the natural setting. Field notes were taken and they helped a lot in defining the meanings of these peculiar practices.

The ethical standards were also followed throughout the research process. The confidentiality was ensured to the participants and the audio data was recorded with the permission of the participants, though some participants did not allowed the audio recording and the dignity and wellbeing of the participants has been maintained all the time. Questions related to personal identity were not asked and any data related to personal identity of cases was separated at the time of analysis.

The data are qualitative in nature so they were analyzed on the basis of themes developed through the major findings. The multiple themes were developed and the responses were solicited from the respondents.

6. Results and Discussion

Under the objective of the study, the knowledge, behaviors and belief system of the people towards the shrine of Shah Daulah have been explored in detail. The gathered information from these interviewees gives an insight into the issue and help in understanding the process of the construction of new norms, knowledge, values and social realities, around the prevailing culture at the shrine.

Syed Kabir-Ud-Din Alias Shah Daulah Daryai was born during the rule of Bahadur Shah Zafar in Sialkot. But he lost his parents in his early childhood and migrated to the nearest city Gujrat where he stayed and preached for the rest of his life. The picture of the Shah Daulah is available at the Lahore Museum where they kept it as part of mystic history. One of the most prominent identity of this shrine is the association of micro-cephalic babies (locally known *Chuas*-mice) with it. Exactly when and how the *chuas* first became associated with the shrine is now impossible to know. The earliest shrine records do not mention about the *chuas*. Locally it is also famous and some people believe that *chuas* were born with a *panja* marked on the forehead. It means a five fingered hand which associates them to the saint.

There was an attempt to find whether any artificial deformation is privately practiced in the shrine. On the other hand, microcephaly as a natural occurrence is certainly found worldwide. In fact, there is no scientific evidence that microcephaly can be produced by deliberate cranial deformation. It is very unlikely that it could actually be done without fatal damage to the growing brain. According to Patch (1928) the evidence for such forceful and artificial deformation against this shrine is weak. The shrine is not in some very remote and far flung place beyond reach of the state authorities. The shrine is at one edge of a city of some significance. Through much of the 19th century there were official visits, studies and enquiries about the shrine, yet as Patch (1928) remarked, "During the eighty years of British administration not a single charge of such malpraxis has been brought against the priests at the shrine of Shah Daulah."



Fig. 4 - Shops selling floral sheets, silver-idols, flowers and sweets outside the shrine
(Photo by Author).

The study reveals that there are multiple factors such as family, peer group, religion, literature and overall cultural values that influence the belief system of the people about shrines and the rituals associated to these shrines. All the respondents were interviewed at the shrine and most of them were belonging to the rural settings except five respondents. The respondents had varying economic and social backgrounds with majority of them were having no education or lower levels. Only two respondents had qualification up to matriculation level.

One of the respondents was a medical professional. The incomes of the respondents were also varying as most of them consider themselves as from the lower-middle strata of population with not having sustained incomes. This shows that the majority of shrine visitors and followers belong to the lower socioeconomic strata. But on the other hand in overall population, the lower socioeconomic strata is the larger one. When tried to dugout about this, it was found that people with low education levels and weak economic backgrounds often believe more strongly in ritualistic myths. When people do not have rational understanding of their issues, the often follow the traditional understandings and beliefs blindly.

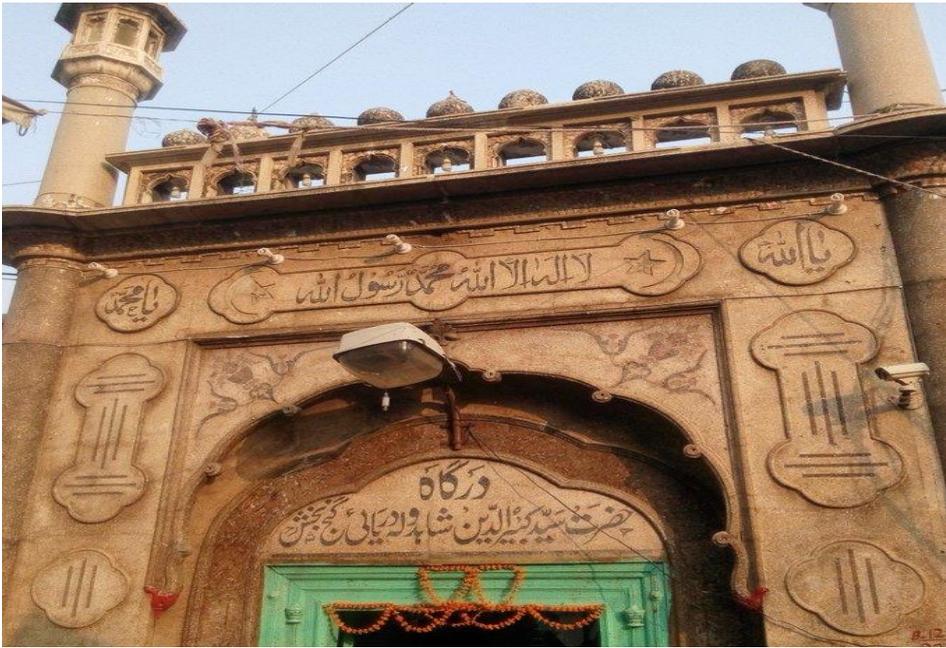


Fig. 5 - Entrance gate of the shrine (Photo by Author).

The study reveals that the majority of the respondents believes that rituals performed at the shrine really work for them. They are convinced that such rituals are beneficial for the treatment of unwanted pimples, paralysis (physical dis-functions) and to pray for the birth of their first child. Many success stories and case studies were famous amongst them. Furthermore, it was shared by the respondents that they developed their learning about the spiritual guidance of the shrine from their peers and families. They not only started to visit this shrine but influenced others to do so as they find it beneficial to them in most of the times whenever they came across miseries or had a bad health. In the same way people spread to others their knowledge about the worship of shrines. This is the situation when social construction theory comes into the act. One of the respondents shared his views about this very practice of oblation and fixation of beliefs to the shrine in the following way:

“My brother got a big pimple on his neck and he purchased a silver dot-which was easily available in the idol shop near the complex of Shah Daula shrine. He put this silver dot-idol in the

box placed in the compound of the shrine. After few days his big pimple started diminishing from the neck. This further strengthened our faith in the spiritual abilities of shrine.”

They firmly believe that using the silver idol as an oblation cured the paralyzed people, however one of the respondents shared that it is not necessary true for all cases. It was observed that well-educated visitors do not spend more time at shrine and they simply pray and then leave. Many forms of gifts have been offered at the shrine such as cash donations, idols, animals and food offerings. However, the most common type of gifts were the cash offerings and the use of idols as an oblation. One of the respondents shared that:

“I do not give cash, rather I usually sit in the compound of the shrine and usually clean the surrounding of the tomb of Sufi with a broom. I find relief whenever I do such acts. That's why I preach my family and friends that they shall visit this mystic place and sit for a while to get relieved.”

Not all visitors give donations to the shrines some of them just come and spend their time at the shrine. Other pay visits to consume the *langar*-as the wealthy devotees distribute free food on the regular basis but more particularly on Thursdays and Fridays. Some of the visitors also come as an entertainment as, in most of the cases, they come and see other people performing rituals at the shrines. Some people just come to stare at the female visitors at it is very common practice in Pakistan.

So, shrines are the spaces used by different people for different purposes. Those visitors who can afford it give donations, perform the oblation rituals and some of them spread floral sheets on the tombs. A very interesting finding in this regard was the lack of recreational facilities and options in overall society. People do not have places to sit, relax and spend time. So, a number of persons saw the shrine as a place for social gathering and spending time on a place which is socially acceptable.

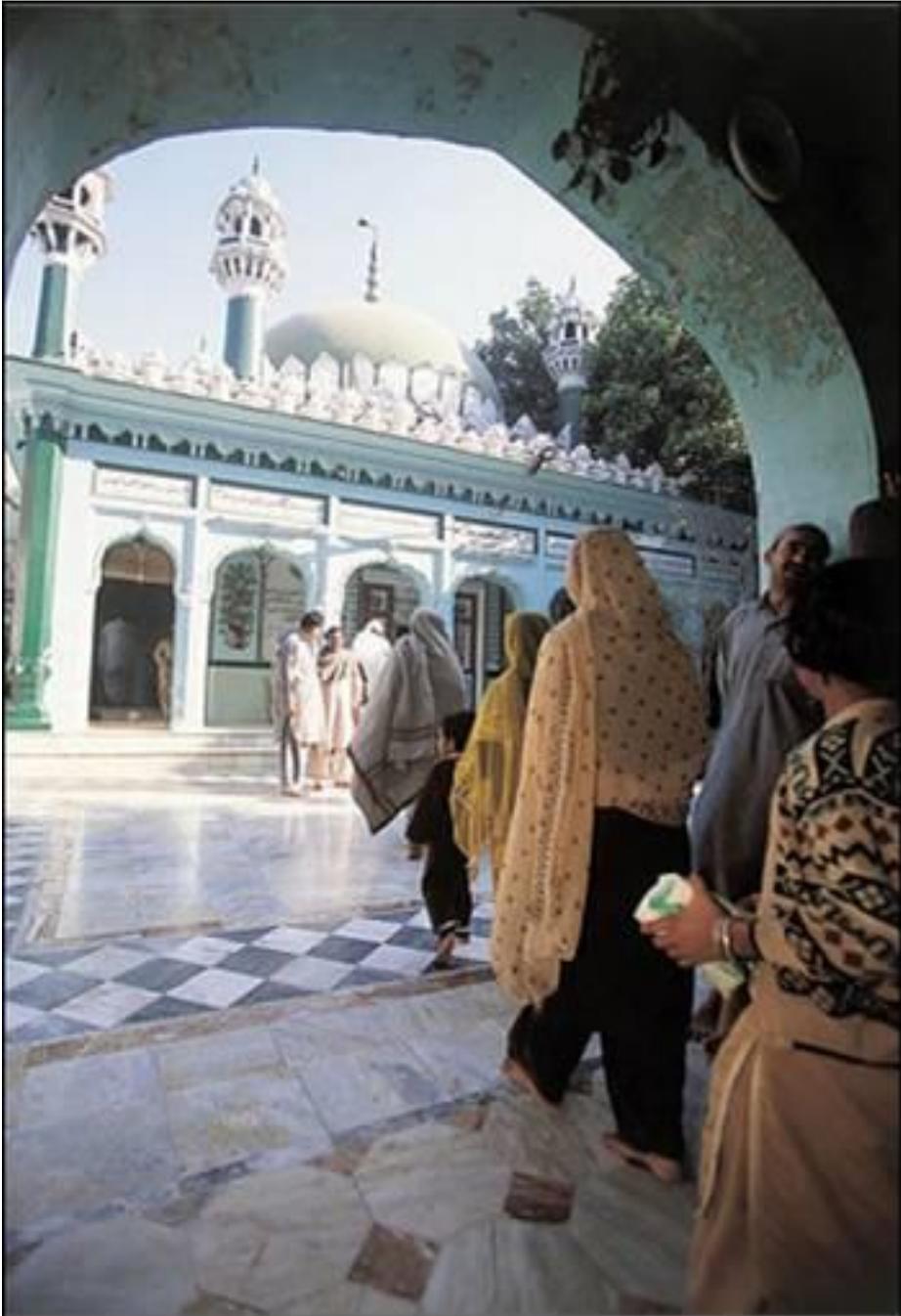


Fig. 6 - Devotees entering the compound of the shrine (Photo by Author).

The spiritual literature can widely be seen on the shops annexed to the shrine complexes throughout Pakistan and on these texts one can find stories of miracles are performed by the mystics. In the case of Shah Daulah, one can find so many miracles narrated in the literature that consequently make people believe in his spiritual abilities. So, this could be the one way through which the reverence could be multiplied. No one knows about the authenticity of such miracles as they are part of the oral narrations and people have been listening at first to these stories as word of mouth. The literature available at the shrines are usually written by the devotees and its purpose is not to objectively present history, the purpose rather to present the miracles of the mystics. They consider this transmission as a duty which will reward them in their life, on the other hand they can to spread facts as per their belief to the masses.

Commenting on a question about the reason why the shrine of Shah Daulah was preferred for oblation instead of other shrine in the area, that there are many native traditions that are associated with this particular shrine and, above all, their families and communities have been visiting this shrine since time immemorial. The cultural pattern at a larger as well as at local level encourage the social actors to perform the rituals at this particular shrine. This shows that traditional family practices have a very strong influence on individuals in constructing beliefs, performing rituals and, in general, carrying their lives.

One of the major expectations people reserve to the shrine of Shah Daulah is about the fulfilling the desire of having a child. It is believed that if you are infecund then you must visit this shrine to get a good news of a baby. In overall Pakistani society child birth is considered the most effective bond to strengthen the marital knot and a friendly relationship. Further to this, son preference is everywhere and giving birth to a baby boy elevates a woman's social position within family and community. Almost every woman wants to give birth to a baby boy because of the worth attached to a son in the strong patriarchal structure.

This situation provides an opportunity to such beliefs and social spaces to get social acceptance and a value. Many shrines and peers are visited by newlywed couples for this purpose. It was found during the study that people were having a strong faith but they narrate a weird norm of this gain from the mystic. They explain that those who get baby as a result of vows they made at this shrine in such a case they had to donate this very first baby to the shine. Those very babies have been attributed as

“rat-people” or Shah Daulah’s *chuay*. Few respondents mentioned about such visits by the couples who don’t conceive a baby. They visited shrine, prayed and made vows about having a child but the cost of such desires are so bitter. However, this trend has also been diminished with the time peculiarly after the strict check and balance maintained by the administration of the shrine.

The study revealed that the rat-people of Shah Daulah were no more available at the shrine and there was no association between the shrine and those famous rat people. A female respondent was of the view that:

“last year I suffered from a skin allergy and on the advice of my mother I vowed a silver made idol at the shrine. I started recovering after sometime and now regularly visit the shrine with my children and make vows about their prosperity.”

Few practices which are controversial in most of the sects of Islam like prostration (*sajda*) were also performed by many of the visiting devotees to show their reverence to the shrine. The motivations behind the specific rituals are quite multifaceted as the social or religious learned behaviours as well as the psychological factors play a vital role in this regard. The fear of the Allah has also been linked to the reverence to the shrine, at the same time people consider it a link between them and Allah. The common opinion of the visitors was that since their family and ancestors were attached to this shrine so they were keeping the same tradition alive.

7. Conclusions

Pakistani society is in a transitional phase where due to lack of access to education and awareness of facts still many traditional beliefs and rituals are strongly followed. Questions of rationality are still not welcomed by the broader society. Currently due to increased urbanization, migration and access of mass media, the modern knowledge and culture is replacing the traditional and long established norms and belief system. But the visitation to Sufi shrines, making of vows and performance of oblation rituals is still very common in most of the regions across Pakistan. The visiting devotees put a strong faith in such practices at time of ailment, misery or any socio-psychological distress they come across. These spiritual spaces provide them with an instant cure to the problems they

come across. The finding of the current study suggests that people in Gujrat, mostly of the lower economic strata, usually visit the shrine of Shah Daulah and perform number of rituals including, but not limited to, oblation of silver-made items, donation in the form of money, and *langer* distribution. Most of the visiting devotees had a strong faith that whenever they come across any misery they usually visit this shrine and made vows for the rescue.

The process of social construction is spreadable at macro and micro levels and different institutions, actors of the society disseminate the social realities, knowledge, learning and myths to each other. The behavior of the visiting devotees at the shrine appeared as the production of various kinds of interactions, perceptions, literature, religious teachings and experiences. Such behavior may lead to the stronger belief system or the other way around. The visitors further disseminate and construct knowledge on the basis of their belief system and disseminate it to their peers, children and society at large.

8. Recommendations

The study recommends that an appropriate environment should be created where the state may provide all the basic facilities to the visitors and on the other side an awareness campaign may also be launched at the shrine for prohibiting harmful practices.

The theoretical framework used in this study can be used as a comprehensive model to understand the beliefs and practices of the visitors at any shrine across the country. The visitors must be guided about specific dos and don'ts at the shrine. A strong mechanism of accountability should be implemented as visitors give huge cash and valuable offerings. The duty of Islamic scholars is above all and they should enlighten the people about the true spirit and philosophy of the teachings of the Sufi Saints. The relevant authorities should always play their role in maintaining and ensuring the discipline at the shrine. The original teachings and literature of the Shah Daulah must be made available for the visitors so that they could know the real philosophy of their teachings.

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