

Cultural Practices and the Narratives from the Field: A Study of Shrine in Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to study and explore how the different cultural practices of the people in the north-western Himalayas tend to produce the landscape and places being sacred. Every religion is a cultural product created by the human community that practices it. Practices are patterns of social interactions and behaviours. They represent the knowledge of “what to do, when and where” and how to interact with a particular culture. The present paper seeks to understand these configurations and employs the ‘theory of Practice’. The universe for the present study includes the sacred landscape of Jammu and Kashmir. The study is both exploratory and descriptive in nature.

The present paper is an attempt to study and explore how the different cultural practices of the people in the north-western Himalayas tend to produce the landscape and places being sacred. The State of Jammu and Kashmir falls in the great north-western, complex of the Himalayan ranges. A variety of cultures have developed among different ethnic stocks in the Indian Himalayas. This has been aided by the fact that the mountain people have mostly lived in valleys isolated from the rest of the world, with entry and exit points lying over high mountain passes. Due to such geographical isolation, they could develop their own distinct cultures and traditions. Indian Himalayas mark the crossroads of Asia's three main religions; Kashmir, known as paradise on earth is largely influenced by Islam. The foothills of Jammu, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand (earlier part of Uttar Pradesh) form the northern boundary of Hinduism. The entire Trans Himalayan region, from Ladakh (Jammu and Kashmir) through Tibet and onto the eastern state of Sikkim, has seen a dominating influence of Buddhism.

The present paper is thus an attempt to make a sociological investigation of diverse cultural practices creating a unique sacred landscape of the North-Western Himalayas falling in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The universe for the present study includes the sacred landscape of Jammu and Kashmir.

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The study would be both exploratory and descriptive in nature. In the state of Jammu and Kashmir which falls in the north-western Himalayas, there are many cultural sites located in different places and also each cultural site is associated with different cultural practices. The ‘cultural site’ may be a pilgrimage site, temple, Shrine or a festival where the cultural activities are performed. The present paper studies the Shrine of Hazrat Zian-ud-Din Wali. In these cultural sites, there are observed distinct and ancient cultural practices. The present research has explored the different cultural practices associated with this cultural site which make the whole landscape of that place sacred.

Every religion is a cultural product created by the human community that practices it (Braun and McCutcheon 2009: 225). Practices are patterns of social interactions and behaviours. Practices involve the use of products. They represent the knowledge of “what to do, when and where” and how to interact with a particular culture. Products are the tangible or intangible creations of a particular culture. They reflect a culture’s perspectives. Tangible products include paintings, a cathedral, a piece of literature whereas intangible products include an oral tale, a dance, a sacred ritual, a system of education, law etc. Perspectives are the philosophical perspectives, meanings, attitudes, values, beliefs, ideas that underlie the cultural practices and products of a society. They represent a culture’s view of the world (National Standards for Foreign Language Education Project, 1999). The present paper in order to understand these configurations will employ the ‘theory of practice’ of Pierre Bourdieu. Practice theory is a body of work about the work of the body. With one or two exceptions, this loose network of approaches to social theory takes the human body to be the nexus of ‘arrays of activities’ (i.e. practices) that agents perform with greater or lesser commitment, dexterity and grace. Whilst some of these practices are widely diffused across social space and time, others are found clustered in configurations that change over time through the socially (re)productive agency of practitioners.

Locating the creation of sacred place as a result of human activity is a type of behaviour that sacralises certain places. As Smith’s analysis of the hierarchical placement of specific groups within relative proximity to the holy of holies in Ezekiel’s Temple suggests, much of this behaviour has to do with acknowledging and expressing reverence for different types of power. Certainly, a temple constructed to house a God and the ritual activities performed there acknowledges and reveres the divine or supernatural power of the god. Many societies have believed that expressing proper reverence toward supernatural power brings

positive outcomes whereas the absence of such reverence courts disaster (Kilde, 2008: 40). The cultural processes that shape the landscape are also themselves in turn shaped by landscapes, fundamental nature of the relationship(s) between people and the spaces they occupy. Within this ongoing examination of the relationships between nature and culture is how communities transform physical spaces into meaningful places.

All religious places are not homogeneous for everyone. Even for a so-called non-religious man, certain places have more importance and are therefore considered as different from other places. But, it can be said, no place has inherent qualities that set it apart from other places, it is the meaning that a believer attaches to a particular place that makes it sacred or holy. A believer generally has emotional significance for the sacred places. This is usually a pronounced characteristic of the sacred. For Hindus the entire cosmos is sacred.

Many religions recognise sacred space and sacred places such as caves, groves, lakes, mountains (such as Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai) and rivers (such as the Ganges and Jordan). This reflects the formative influence of environment in the evolution of different religions and in turn, encourages the preservation of sacred landscapes (Park, 1994: 249–57). Religion is one of the foundations of cultural vital strands in the fabric of societies. In many societies less dominated by technology than, religion is the great binding force, the dominant ruler of daily life. From eating habits to dress codes, religion sets the standards for the community (De Blij and Muller 1986:181).

In this paper, only one cultural site (Shrine of *Zia-ud din wali*) is discussed which is located in the upper Himalayan ranges of Anantnag district. The historical background of this site is very old. There are different folk tales regarding this cultural site. As per the local narratives, there was a cave located at *Ashvoukam* around 3000 B.C. Ever since, the Zool festival has been practising every now and then. The cave was occupied by Zia-Ud-Din around 1420 A.D and was named after him. Later on, the followers of Islam built the Shrine around the cave in the memory of Zia-ud-Din. Now, this place is mostly visited by Muslim communities but still some Hindu as well as other communities who visited this place and have a belief in this site.

Daily Cultural Practices in the Ziarat

The daily cultural practices associated with the site include, they have to enter with bare feet and they should bow their heads. They should also rub their nose and roll down their

children in front of the shrine. They wipe the dust from the floor and apply this to their chest and other body parts which they believe that it would cure their diseases. Some of the people also chant *Wanvun* (traditional Kashmiri folklore song) praising the saint Zia-u-din to get his blessings. The locals also do their ceremony of *Mundan* (cutting the hair of young children) also to be done here in the Ziarat. Sheep and bull slathering also practices in the Shrine when their wishes and desires are fulfilled. Donation in the form of money, rice and mustard oil is practised by the locals in the Ziarat. Those who were suffering from skin diseases used mustard oil in a pot which is inside the cave. Tying of threads outside the shrine by the visitors to believe that wishes will be fulfilled is also practices which are also seen in other shrines.

Zool Festival: Narratives from the field

The festivals associated with this site are Zool (known as fire festival), Urs and Shab-Khani. The zool festival is a very important festival of this site as it was said to be a very old festival of the region. There are many folk tales associated with this festival. It is celebrated in the memory of *Bhimsen's* victory over the demon. Narrative associated with the festival is that there once there lived a demon, who daily eats dozens of people. Then people of that area decided to have a treaty with that demon in which people will offer a one human and food to that demon and in return demon will not pick up any person from the village by his choice. As this process goes on once there visited a saint named Bhimsen in that village (*ashvamaakam*) who heard the voices of cry by the old lady. When *Bhimsen* asked the old lady why she is crying she narrated the whole story of demon and also said that today is her sons turn and she has only one son and today is his marriage.

Bhimsen decided to go instead of that lady's son. Bhimsen and demon's fight took many days. But at last Bhimsen killed the demon. The demon was killed at the time of evening so the people from villages come out of their houses to celebrate this event by lighting the firewood (also called as *marshals* in Hindi). Today this festival is celebrated in the month of April. The timing of this festival is evening; firstly the *namaz* is observed by the people at the Shrine then there is a special type of dance associated with this festival called *Damali dance*. This dance is performed by the people from the specific sections of the society who are specialized in this type of dance. The whole villagers take part in this festival either by lightning the *marshals* outside their home or visiting the shrine which shows that the landscape becomes sacred.

Sacred structures in the rural landscape, therefore, represent a significant phenomenon connected to regional identity. However, perceptions of such structures have often changed from religious motives to historical–cultural motives. The findings of field investigations of sacred sites also support the idea of the existence of multiple types of communities visiting and having a strong belief system which shows that idea that ‘sacredness’ is constructed, not given. It is vital that the term ‘sacred’ continues to be theorized, contested and negotiated, that a single meaning is not ‘set in stone’. This article conveyed a glimpse of the vast didactic potential of sacred sites as an object for critical reflection through the field and, conversely, of fieldwork as an effective educational practice for engaging with sacred space.

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