

Issues/Discussion Forum

Upsetting Sufis: ‘Talibanisation of the Pakistani Society’

Nadeem F. Paracha

After targeting police and military personnel, Pakistani extremist and sectarian outfits, many of whom (in 2007) came under the umbrella of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), began to also target worshipers in mosques and common civilians in market places with remote-controlled exploding devises and suicide bombers.

They then further expanded their relentless (and remorseless) campaign of anarchic destruction by also including Sufi shrines to their long list of places to be attacked.

A spate of terrorist attacks by the extremists on some famous Sufi shrines in Pakistan has brought into focus something that was taken for granted, and only rarely studied: Pakistan’s ‘shrine culture’ that still thrives in the subcontinent.

This is an important development especially considering the negligible knowledge the country’s young urbanites have of this culture – in spite of the fact that shrines continue to play an important spiritual and economic role in the lives of a majority of Pakistanis.

The shrine culture, pertaining to the devotional, recreational and professional activity around the shrines of Muslim saints, has been present in the subcontinent for hundreds of years.

It is largely associated with activity around the shrines of Sufi saints who started arriving from Iraq, Iran and Central Asia with various waves of Muslim invaders in India from the 8th Century onwards.

These men (and some women) fused Islamic esotericism with the cultural rituals of the many religions that they came into contact with in the subcontinent.

More than the ulema and the clerics, it was the Sufi saints who made the foremost social contribution to the spreading of Islam in the region.

The saints interpretation of Islam was more accommodating. Consequently, over the centuries a largely permissive culture of devotional music and indigenously cultivated rituals began taking shape around and inside the shrines.

The shrine culture was enthusiastically patronised by various Muslim dynasties that ruled the subcontinent, and it became a vital part of the belief and ritual system of a large number of Muslims in the region.

This culture has remained intact amongst the majority of Muslims of the region despite the attempts of many puritanical movements striving to eliminate it, alleging that it encouraged heretical ritual and doctrinal innovations.

Though before the 1960s, a majority of urban middle-class Pakistanis had always described this culture as born from the spiritual convictions of the uneducated and the superstitious, Pakistani rulers from 1947 till 1977, openly patronised influential pirs (head of shrines and Sufi orders), to blunt the political challenges posed by the advocates of the more puritanical strains of the faith.

Even before the creation of Pakistan when conservative 19th century Islamic revivalists were denouncing Muslim modernists and reformers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Syed Ameer Ali for asking India's Muslims to gain a Western education, and to turn towards a rational interpretation of the Islamic scriptures, Syed and Ali had found some support from Muslim traditionalists who were trying to bring the shrine culture on a single doctrinal platform.

Though before the 1960s, a majority of urban middle-class Pakistanis had always described this culture as born from the spiritual convictions of the uneducated and the superstitious, Pakistani rulers from 1947 till 1977, openly patronised influential Pirs (head of shrines and Sufi orders), to blunt the political challenges posed by the advocates of the more puritanical strains of the faith.

These traditionalists, such as Ahmad Raza Khan, too were facing intellectual attacks from puritanical revivalists.

Raza responded by attempting to give a more consolidated shape to the widespread but diverse shrine culture in India – a loose and decentralized construct that began to be called ‘Barelvi Islam.’

In Pakistan, since ‘Barelvi Islam’ and the shrine culture remained to constitute the bulk of the ‘folk religion’ of the masses, secular military dictator Ayub Khan and the populist Z A. Bhutto, both actively patronised it to ward off the challenges faced by them from the conservative Islamic parties.

The patronage that this culture got, especially by leaders like Bhutto in the 1970s, saw it begin to attract urban middle-class youth as well.

For example, just like the middle-class hippies of the West (in the 1960s) – who had chosen various esoteric Eastern spiritual beliefs to demonstrate their disapproval of the ‘soullessness’ of the Western system – young, middle-class Pakistanis (in the early 1970s), increasingly started looking upon Sufism and the shrine culture as a way to make a social and political connect with the ‘downtrodden and the dispossessed,’ and to show their disapproval of the figurative ‘mullah.’

During political rallies, former Pakistani Prime Minister, Z A. Bhutto often submerged himself in the role of a modern-day Sufi. On such occasions he used to discard his expensive suits in favour of a simple Quameez-Shalwar; then after rolling up his sleeves and rip-opening his front buttons, spoke like a man intoxicated by the energy of the masses. In the Punjab, a famous Punjabi Sufi ‘dhamal’ song dedicated to Sufi saint, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, was tweaked by Bhutto’s admirers and his name added to the song (Dam-a-dam mast Qalandar, Bhutto da pahla number).

Middle-class Pakistani youth began to frequent shrines more often, especially on Thursdays, when (till even today), a number of shrines hold nights dedicated to the traditional and hypnotic sub-continental Sufi devotional music, the ‘Qawwali.’

The country’s shrine culture is still strongly linked to ‘Barelvi Islam.’ It openly celebrates the ritual and social outcome of Sufism’s historical engagement in the region with other faiths.

According to an extensive 2006 report published in the academic journal, *Critique*, the percentage of people visiting mosques in Pakistan before the 1980s was one of the lowest; but today it is one of the highest (the lowest now is in Albania, Turkey and, surprisingly, Iran).

Till the late 1970s more Pakistanis visited shrines than they did mosques.

Though some scorn at this, there are those who suggest that the level of violence, crime and corruption (and religious hypocrisy) in the society were drastically lower than what it climbed up to become from the 1980s onwards.

In other words, the rise in the number of mosques and in the number of those who visit them didn't turn Pakistan into becoming a more stable and 'cleansed' society.

Muslim evangelists, conscious of this fact, maintain that this is mainly due to Pakistanis' lack of understanding of the 'discipline-generating aspects of namaz (Muslim prayer ritual),' and of the 'hypocritical way that they approach this ritual.

When (in 1977) the reactionary military general, Ziaul Haq, toppled Bhutto, he found it hard to introduce certain harsh Islamic laws in a scene steeped in centuries-old traditions of 'folk Islam' revolving around the shrine culture.

This culture was not attuned to the interpretation of jihad that Zia was using to boost up his regime's aggressive stance against the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan.

The widespread shrine culture's passiveness and looseness constituted a problem for Zia.

As a response, his dictatorship went about building a number of new mosques and madrasas (mostly paid from Saudi 'Petro-Dollars'), and headed by puritanical and radical religious leaders.

In a speech given by Zia during a religious conference in Islamabad in 1983, Zia suggested that a 'mosque's Maulvi was really an Islamic scholar (Ulama) and should not be made fun of.'

This was a plea by the dictator that the shrine culture that had for centuries shown a revulsion against the ‘mullah,’ should treat him with as much reverence as it does a pir.

Zia’s speech came during a time when many shrines (especially in Sindh) had become centres of intense protest activity against the dictator.

At the same time, Zia began co-opting conservative spiritual leaders (Pirs).

The tactic of ‘hijacking’ the shrines (through co-opted pirs and ‘ulema’) was successful in diminishing the participation of the middle-classes in the shrine culture, but the culture’s core participants (the ‘masses’) remained intact.

Another reason for this was also the social and economic impact that travelling to and working in oil-rich Arab countries had on a number of Pakistanis.

Many Pakistanis (especially from the Punjab and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) had increasingly begun to travel to and work in Arab countries from the mid-1970s onwards, especially when a building boom began to take shape in these countries due to the rise in the price of oil.

Those returning to Pakistan in the 1980s or sending money back from the oil-rich Arab countries perhaps gave birth to Pakistan’s first major batch of the ‘nouveau-riche’ lot.

The phenomenon was satirically captured by director Haider Chaudry’s film ‘Dubai Chalo’ (Let’s Go to Dubai).

Though released in 1979, the film was slightly ahead of its time in accurately depicting the cultural fall-out of the mad dash towards oil-rich Middle Eastern countries.

A lot of men (and some women) who managed to travel to places like Dubai and Saudi Arabia as labourers and white-collar professionals saw an impressive rise in their incomes, and along with the money they also began sending brand new Japanese VCRs, radios and colour TV sets to their families in Pakistan.

With all this came a largely transformed view of faith as well. And with a religiously conservative man as the country’s new leader (Ziaul Haq), those returning

from their Middle Eastern jobs found an encouraging environment to shed off their old ‘Barelvi’ (and at times ‘liberal’) pasts and replace them with a more puritanical strain of the faith that was (and still is) emphasised by Arab monarchies.

Early on many Pakistani and Indian Muslims who had travelled to these monarchies were mocked by their Arab employers for ‘holding heretical views’ (Sufism, shrine visitations, etc.)

Also, the new money and socio-economic status that they gained due to their jobs in Arab countries was not only expressed with the exhibition of brand new electronic equipment and homes, it was also expressed with the portrayal of their new-found outlook of Islam.

The past that was traditionally associated with ‘folk Islam’ now reminded many people of days when they were not so well-off and lower down in the pecking order.

Many signs reflected this. From the rise in the number of large mosques, madrasas, ‘Islamic schools’, to the proliferation of VCRs, colour TVs, new cars and the emergence of brand new bungalows and apartment buildings, many of them with the inscription of the Arabic term (Mashaallah – Whatever Allah Wills), scribbled at the entrances.

Consequently, with the urban middle-classes gradually turning towards the more conservative strains of the faith and the state halting its patronage of the shrines, many shrines faced neglect and a growth of crime around them.

One of the outcomes of this neglect, and the pressure Barelvi Islam faced with the state-sponsored rise of militant Islamists was the eventual creation of the first radical outfit of Barelvi Muslims, the Sunni Tehreek (ST).

Sectarian in outlook (anti-Shia and anti-Deobandi/‘Wahabi’), and militantly opposed to any change in the country’s controversial blasphemy laws (introduced by Zia), the ST at the same time, is vehemently anti-Taliban (who are an extreme version of ‘Deobandi Islam’).

Just before it began praising the killer of Salman Taseer in 2011 (shot dead by a man who claimed Taseer was a blasphemer), Sunni Tehreek was also being courted

by the US as a potential Sunni militant counterpoint against the Deobandi/Wahabi-influenced Islamists.

Nevertheless, the patronage was ended once the Tehreek began to justify Taseer's murder.

After Pakistan's plunge into the 'War on Terror' and the consequential rise in the number of terrorist attacks by Islamist militants, the Pakistani state's interest in reinvigorating the all-encompassing nature of the shrine culture was revived.

Governments under General Pervez Musharraf and the current PPP-led coalition invested funds and effort to upgrade and renovate various famous shrines – especially as an attempt to neutralise the growth of extremism now creeping within the middle and lower-middle-classes.

Some sceptics suggest action in this respect has come a bit too late. The process that saw large numbers of (mainly urban) Pakistanis switching to the more puritanical and conservative denominations of Islam, and the neglect the shrine culture faced in the last two decades, has now opened up the shrine culture to radicalised and less pluralistic Bareilvi elements who, to exhibit that they can be equally 'Islamic' and 'anti-West' as the puritans, are rapidly confining the centuries old pluralistic dynamics of this culture.

For example, in the Punjab, many famous shrines have increasingly disallowed the mixing of the sexes – something that was common in and around these shrines for hundreds of years.

And though nothing of the sort has happened in shrines in Karachi and especially in the rest of the Sindh province, political forces opposed to 'Talibanisation', have shown concern that the shrine culture in Sindh too might experience the mutation of its traditional pluralistic environment.

As a response, between 2006 and 2009, Karachi's city government headed by the secular MQM, invested heavily to renovate some of Karachi's most frequented shrines, and also clean-up the 'unwanted rabble' around it so that middle and lower-middle-class Karachiites could begin returning to them.

In Sindh, the PPP-led provincial government, in an attempt to attract and reconnect the new (and largely secular) Sindhi middle-classes to the province's historical link with Sufism has planned to construct a Sufi university at Bhit Shah ('International Sufi University').

However, even though attendance at Sufi shrines continues to be large, there is certainly a steady decline in this respect compared to what it was 25 years ago.

And just how strong the shrine culture is today to withstand what is being decried as the 'Talibanisation of the Pakistani society', is still up for debate.

As one journalist remarked on the eve of the extremists' attack on the popular shrine of Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore (in 2007)

'The whole of Lahore would have come out to protest had this attack taken place 20 years ago.' But, as the saddened journalist lamented, 'today Lahorites decided to stay home and just remain quiet.'

Nadeem F. Paracha is a cultural critic and senior columnist for Dawn Newspaper and Dawn.com

(Country : New Age Islam)