

Linguistic Anthropology

(Shrine Project)

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Project description

This ethnography project was to be conducted in a religious shrine, and based on the main arguments presented in the concerned course titled 'Linguistic anthropology', the main aim of this project was to observe and analyze the different forms of language, linguistic scripts, and other signs and symbols which were used/ displayed in the shrine. Moreover, to facilitate this analysis, and to know more about the history and significance of the shrine and the saints, a brief interview was also conducted.

Location of the shrine

The shrine which I chose to visit for this project is the shrine of Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, and his great great grand father (Pir shah Ghazi) who was also a saint, and is located in a small village called 'Khari Sharif'. This village is located between Mirpur city in Azad Kashmir (my home town) and Jhelum in Pakistan. The shrine itself is often called or referred to as 'Khari sharif"', owing to its location. As for it's distance from Mirpur city, the shrine is located approximately 10 Km south of the city, and is around a 30 min drive from the center of the city depending on the traffic. With its position relative to Lahore, the shrine is located around 220 km north from Lahore.

Structure of the shrine

Despite having no prior experience of visiting a shrine and also knowing much about how different shrines look and are structured, I deemed this shrine to be quite large, as it covered a major portion of the village itself. Due to the large number of visitors each day, the shrine contains a fairly large parking area, which consists of both a paid parking area and also a free of cost parking area, with the paid parking area being fairly closer to the actual entrance of the shrine. Moving towards the entrance, the visitors pass through a graveyard section which contains graves of prominently devout followers of the saints which are buried at this shrine.

The graveyard, and in-fact the entire area where the shrine is located is extensively covered with large trees. Some of these devout followers lived abroad, and hence, as per their wishes their bodies were flown in from abroad, a practice that symbolizes their devotion. Moving forward, the visitors pass through a well-equipped market area, where vendors sold different essential items need to perform different rituals at the shrine. These items included: flowers, different pieces of cloth with Quranic scripts, scented candles/sticks, and also sweets and different offerings which people distribute in the shrine. Other than these essential items, the shops vendors also sold other food and beverages, different forms of art and craft materials, crockery, toys, clocks, and different forms of jewelry. For me, some of these items seemed quite out of place, and I questioned as to why the shops sold these items as well, and not only the items required for the rituals to be performed at the shrine. I actually asked the person I interviewed, and his response is included in the transcription section.

The actual entrance of the shrine was fairly simple, and led straight into the vast structure of the actual shrine. Inside this structure there is a mosque, which has a huge dome like structure along with a long vertical structure (a common structure of every mosque). This particular mosque had majorly a white exterior, all covered with white paint and tiles/ marble. The floors of the shrine and the entire pathway leading up to the shrine/tomb of the saints and also the mosque were also covered with tiles, which were patterned and were of majorly white and brown color. The outline of this entire area was covered with small hut-like structures, which provided shade and a place to sit for the visitors. There are two separate shrines/tombs where both saints (Mian Muahmmad Bakhsh, and Pir Shah Ghazi) are buried. The structure of these tombs is unique, and has overall a octagon structure, with eight gates for entrance. This structure is entirely covered in marble tiles, which are of white and green in color, also with some shades of blue. Outside these tombs, different poetic verses written by the saints are pasted there, whereas inside the shrine the use of Arabic script can be prominently seen. Inside

the shrine, the use of different styles of calligraphy can be seen, and the entire dome like structure is covered by these scripts. Other than that, a huge chandelier hangs right at the center of the shrine, almost pointing directly towards the grave of the saint. Both the shrine of Mian Muhammad Bakhsh and Pir Shah Ghazi have pretty much the same exterior and interior structures.

Methodology for interview

There are several reasons for choosing this shrine in particular, ranging from being personal, emotional, and merely being the fact that it was convenient and fairly safe and easy to visit this particular shrine. As this shrine was located not far from my home town, I deemed it to be quite convenient to visit this shrine. Secondly, visiting this shrine in particular was also in my best interests as I had connections with two regular visitors of this shrine (both of which are my close relatives), and hence, I assumed (and later found) that it would be not much of a hassle to not only go the shrine but also to find someone whom I can interview. Being a junior researcher, and someone who has little field experience, I was concerned as to how the people in the shrine might react and respond to not only my request for an interview but also how engaged or interested they might be while giving the interview. Hence, based on these assumptions I decided that the best way to conduct an effective and fruitful interview is to go a place where I had some sort of direct or indirect connections. In this case this connection was indirect, as I myself had not visited the shrine before nor did I know anyone there, but I went along with some people who were regular visitors and apparently knew people who were the caretakers and/or part of the shrine's management. In the end, this connection greatly facilitated my visit and interview and I was successfully able to complete this project.

My aunt and uncle, with whom I visited this shrine, asked me about whom I would like to interview, and after I explained the purpose of my visit and also told them some of my

questions, they suggested that I interview one of the prominent religious scholars serving in that shrine and a person who was also an important member of the shrine's management. The person whom I decided to interview was the Imam of the masjid which is located in the shrine, and had been serving in that position since the past 10 years. He was a well educated man and knew a lot about not only Islam but also about the history and significance of the shrine and the saints buried there. As for his appearance, he had a long beard and wore a cap (which are considered to be important components of a male Muslim's appearance), along with simple shalwar kameez (cultural component). Other than that, he wore several rings on his fingers (almost one on each finger) with each ring having a different colored gemstone or crystal. Being a fairly inexperienced interviewer, I deduced that it would not be wise of me to ask out of context questions (in this case about the different components of his outward appearance, especially those rings) and so I decided to just stick to the required questions. I assumed based on my past knowledge about different cultures and beliefs and how different gemstones and crystal are known to provide protection, and positive energy, I concluded that the same might be the case here as well. One of my major concerns while conducting this interview was to 'unintentionally' offend someone, and hence, I decided to just stick to the basic requirements of this interview.

Transcription of the interview

Me: Please tell me about the saints which are buried in this shrine, who were they, where they came from.....?

Interviewee: You see....the time in which we live today and the time of Hazrat Pir Shah Ghazi are around 280 years apart, meaning that Hazrat Pir Shah Ghazi departed from this world around 280 years ago. On the other hand, Mian Muhammad Bakhsh left this world around uhhh.... almost 116 years ago. Meaning that he was born in 1830 and died in 1907, and his

age was approximately 78 years. Both these personalities were known to connect in a spiritual/mystical way, much like how Allama Iqbal gained spiritual wisdom and guidance from another religious personality which existed at an entirely different point in time. Also much like how Data saab (Ali Hajveri) and Hazrat Mohudduin Chisti were known to have this connection, all while existing in different timelines. There is this famous book by Dr Clinton called 'the projection of after body', where he/she (gender was not specified here) wrote that the spiritual and mystical world has its own system/ process of working, meaning that one soul gives guidance to another. Similarly, Mian Muhammad Bakhsh gained spiritual guidance/ wisdom from Pir Shah Ghazi both of which belonged to Gujrati families.....The saint once served in the Mughal army, and one day he had this inner calling towards his religion, after which he isolated himself in the forest and prayed all day long. One day a group of thieves attacked him and stole his belongings, and as they were leaving the saint chanted out that "Take from me whatever you want, because people will eat from my 'faiz' (blessings/ in my name) for years to come. He also said that if I die and I am buried in Khari sharif then people might not get much to eat (sometimes they will get food and sometimes might not get food) but they will get faiz/belssings.....

Me: How is this shrine different from other shrines.....what is its uniqueness/ significance?

Interviewee: The main uniqueness and significance of this shrine is that if you compare it to other shrines across Pakistan, and in fact the entire sub-continent region, no other has a "langar" (charity/food distribution) system as large as what this shrine offers.....people can come and eat multiple times a day.....the shrines ensures their privacy (to protect their dignity)

Me: What sort of Kalaam is used in this shrine....and what is its nature?

Interviewee: As you can see, since this is the shrine of a Muslim personality/scholar, the kalam used is in Arabic and are from the Quran and Sunnah. Other than that, there are also some lines (verses) from Mian Shab's famous works.....All these provide wisdom and are life lessons.

Me: Why are there so many shops here?

Interviewee: So that visitors can buy all essentials needed to perform different rituals at the shrine, like sweets, flowers etc.

Me: So why are some people selling toys, crockery, and other things here?

Interviewee: The shrine has just given these people a place to run their businesses, we just take minimum rent from them.....there is no discrimination at this shrine.....some people come with their little children.....

Findings

Mian Muhammad Bakhsh is known to be among the most famous Sufi saints in the south Asian region. He was born in the village of Khari Sharif in 1830 to a Gujrati family and died in 1907 and was also buried in the same village. He was known to be a Sufi poet, Islamic philosopher and scholar, and is known to have worked and written extensively about Islam and his own life and experiences. In his lifetime, he is known to have written 18 books and over 9000 poetic verses, each covering topics such as religion, praising God, praising the Prophet (PBUH), and also about his own life and words of wisdom he wished to leave behind for his followers. Perhaps his most famous book is called 'Saif-ul-Malook' which is a Folklore and romantic tragedy, known to give important life lessons. As for the languages he spoke and wrote in, Mian Muhamad Bakhsh majorly wrote and spoken Punjabi and Farsi. Here it is important to note that the dialect of Punjabi used by him is called 'Pothwari' which is quite different from the Punjabi which is written and spoken in the rest of Punjab and Pakistan. This

particular dialect is most commonly used by people living in northern parts of Pakistan and Azad Kashmir.

One of the major attributes of this shrine is the 'spirit of giving', as seen by the extensive food distribution system which is set up. As mentioned in the interview, this system is perhaps the largest in the entire sub-continent region. It was also mentioned that people can come in and eat several times a day, all while protecting their privacy and dignity. Other than this the shrine also provides people/ has given them a place to run their business and earn a living, by selling either items used for the different rituals in the shrine or other items as well. The Kalam used in the shrine also promotes this spirit of giving, as the kalam provides spiritual guidance and wisdom to the visitors. To conclude, the shrine not only gives people food, and a place to earn a living, but also gives them wisdom. This act of giving is known to be caused by the saint's work and blessings.

Different forms of language used at the shrine

In the shrine many different forms of language could be visibly seen, these included various forms of scripts which included verses from the Quran, the Hadith of the Prophet (PBUH), and also some of the most famous poet verses written by the Saints. These scripts were displayed both inside and outside the actual shrine, and were either inscribed on the walls, marble slabs, or even written down on posters. Prominently, the verses and of the Quran, the names of Allah and the Prophet (PBUH), and other forms of Arabic script was seen to be included inside the shrine building, for example on the headstone of the saints, and other places near his grave. On the other hand, written work and poetic verses from the saints was displayed outside the shrine building.

Although language in the form of written work and scripts can be visibly seen throughout the shrine, other forms of language such those in the form of signs, symbols, and

even in the form of cultural practices could also be observed. For example, in our contemporary society and culture there is strong gender segregation and hence, men and women stand separately in most public places. The same practice could be seen inside the shrine, where men and women stood on separate sides of the grave of the saint to offer their respects and there was no interaction between them. Another thing which I observed was that there was no caretaker or any other person who instructed these men and women to stand separately, and it appeared that this practice was done by both men and women somewhat intuitively, possibly due to the cultural integration of this practice and through the process of socialization.

Another thing which I noticed was that some people bowed before the stairs before entering the shrine, which is a practice often deemed to symbolize ‘respect and devotion’. Other than this while the people were inside the shrine and stood besides the grave of the saint, the prayed in complete silence, with most of them bowing their heads down while doing so. Both these practices are also deemed to be a symbol of respect.

Accounts of scripts

| Inscription number | Location | Language | Verse, Pir’s saying, etc. |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Head Stone of saints | Arabic | بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ |
| 2 | Head stone of saints | Arabic | لا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ |
| 3 | At the entrance of the shrine | Punjabi (Pothwari dialect) | جے کجھ آیا سو منہ پایا تلی رکابی چٹی خالی ہتھ محمد بخشا تری نکاری لٹی |
| 4 | At the entrance of the shrine | Punjabi (Pothwari dialect) | می نوں ہور نہیں پاسا آسا کس دے گھر تے جاسی روح محمد میرے پیر سچے دے در تے |

Translation of inscriptions (by number):

1. In the name Of Allah, the most gracious the most merciful
2. I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad (PBUH) is the messenger of Allah
3. When you get something you take/eat till there is nothing left (till the pot is empty)

Muhammad bakhsh was empty handed, so only his work/blessings/wisdom was looted/taken
4. I don't have anyone's house to go to

Like the soul of Muhammad (PBUH), my feet are only at the doors of truth

Conclusion

I found this project to be highly engaging and interesting, especially since this was my first time visiting a shrine, and also one of the very few times I participated in a field project. I learned as to how different forms of language were used at this particular and how these forms of language were not only verbal or written, but also in the form of signs, symbols, and practices. I also concluded that the use of such language can be linked back to both religious and cultural beliefs of the people. Lastly, I was also able to make use of prior concepts which I had learned in this course and used them not only to complete this project but also to interpret different forms of language. One of the major concepts which I learned in this course was how a text might change its original meaning once it is translated to a different language. I experienced the same, as I translated some of the poetic text written by the saints, and noticed how one word in Punjabi can have multiple meanings and interpretations in English, and how these differences can impact or entirely change the overall meaning of the text. Despite this difficulty, this project gave me great experience and insights as to how to observe, understand and make use of different forms of language.

Photography































کون بڑے فون یاد رکھی اچھڑے کون قبر فون
کس فون درد املا ہوگی روگ نہ رہے در فون





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سدا محمد بخش نماں ہلیا کرم فضل دا
تکلیہ پرناں محض تساڈا نہ کجھ زلا عمل دا



بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ
نحمدہ و نصلی علی اٰلہٖ و آلہٖ و سلم



مزار مبارک حضرت میاں محمد بخش
رحمۃ اللہ علیہ

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