

Shrine Project

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Introduction

The purpose of visiting the shrine was to complete an assignment for the final course of Linguistic Anthropology. Our objective for this assignment was to find out the nature of the Kalaam used at the shrine and to find out how shrines add cultural value to a society.

Mian Mir's shrine was not my first choice to visit for this project. My initial choice was a shrine in Gulberg; Baba Kahnay Shah's shrine. Due to my illiteracy regarding shrines, the first idea I had to find out what shrine to visit, I searched for shrines near me on Google Maps and saw that Baba Kahnay Shah's shrine was a few minutes away from my house. When I went to that shrine, I encountered a group of 4 men, who all seemed very comfortable there; indicating they frequently visited the shrine. When I asked them about the nature of the Kalaam used at the shrine, none of them had an answer for me and the man claiming to be the caretaker told me about how I had made a bad choice choosing this shrine for my assignment. He was the one who suggested the Shrine of Mian Mir for this assignment keeping in mind its cultural and historical significance.

Upon returning home, I was considerably disappointed, however, I now had an idea of where I needed to go to complete this project. However, when I looked up the shrine, I noticed that it was quite a popular and busy shrine, so getting an interview would be a difficult task. For this purpose, I asked my father if he knew someone who had any link to the shrine. Coincidentally, he had a friend who knew the person who was the manager of the shrine and he got me in touch with him. When I spoke to the manager, I told him about how I needed to take pictures and conduct an interview for the assignment. He readily agreed to set up the interview, however, was very reluctant to agree to the pictures. Upon my query regarding this, he told me about how people make TikToks at the shrine which causes problems for the management. As I

assured him that this was for a university project, he calmed down and agreed to help me. He told me to visit the shrine the next day and gave me the caretaker's name and told me to tell him that I had been authorized to conduct this interview and take photographs and also told me to call him if I encountered any problems.

The next day, I embarked for the shrine, which was located at the back of Upper Mall Scheme, in Umar Colony. Upon arrival at the shrine, the first thing I saw without entering was a very large tree which blocked the view to the shrine. Once I entered the premises, I noticed a large mosque on the right and an area for ablution on the left. Walking towards the mosque, I caught my first glimpse of the shrine, as the tree was not blocking my view anymore. The shrine is a white rectangular structure, on an elevated surface almost 5 feet from the ground. The shrine's exterior was filled with engravings of the name Allah and with borders engraved with paintings of flowers. There were also some larger engravings of flowers blossoming on the outside of the tomb, which I interpreted as a sign of life.

There were not many people present at the shrine when I arrived there, as I had been instructed to go at an earlier time. The reason for this was that the caretaker is usually busy during the later hours of the day when there are more people present. In order to get an interview comfortably, I went early in the morning. During my first interaction with the caretaker, he looked at me as if I seemed like a fish out of water, which is also exactly how I felt. However, once I told him about my project and how I had come there for educational purposes and to get an interview from him, he warmed up to me and invited me to have a seat and chat with him. The man I spoke with was one of the caretakers at the shrine. He told me that there were many caretakers of the shrine and how they have specific working hours assigned to them. Before conducting my interview, I told him about the nature of the questions I planned on asking him

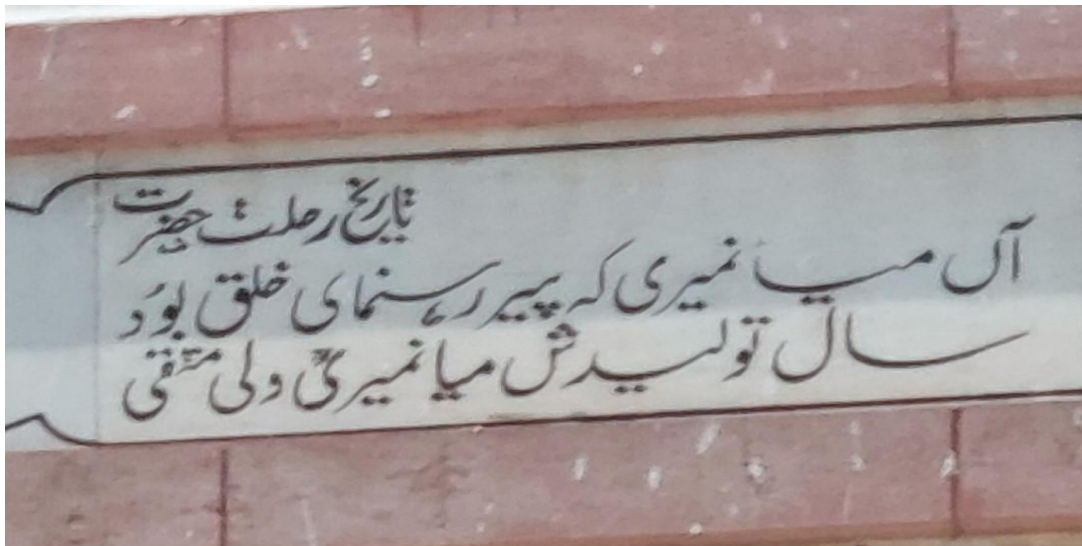
and also told him that his participation is voluntary and he could opt out of it whenever he felt was necessary.

Account of Scripts



This inscription was located at the backside of the shrine. It is Persian poetry and it can be translated as:

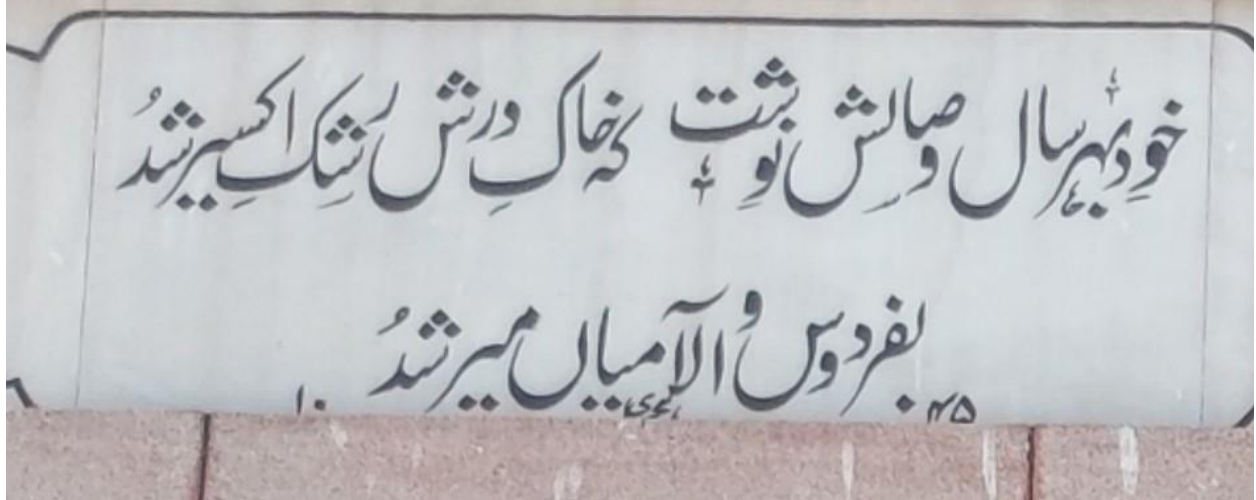
“He was dear to Haq (Allah) and to the King whose name was Khairullah. It's the year of Tarseel (When camel gives milk alot)” Shams ul Atqia Hadi Imam.



This inscription is also of Persian poetry and was located adjacent to the first inscription added.

The translation for this is:

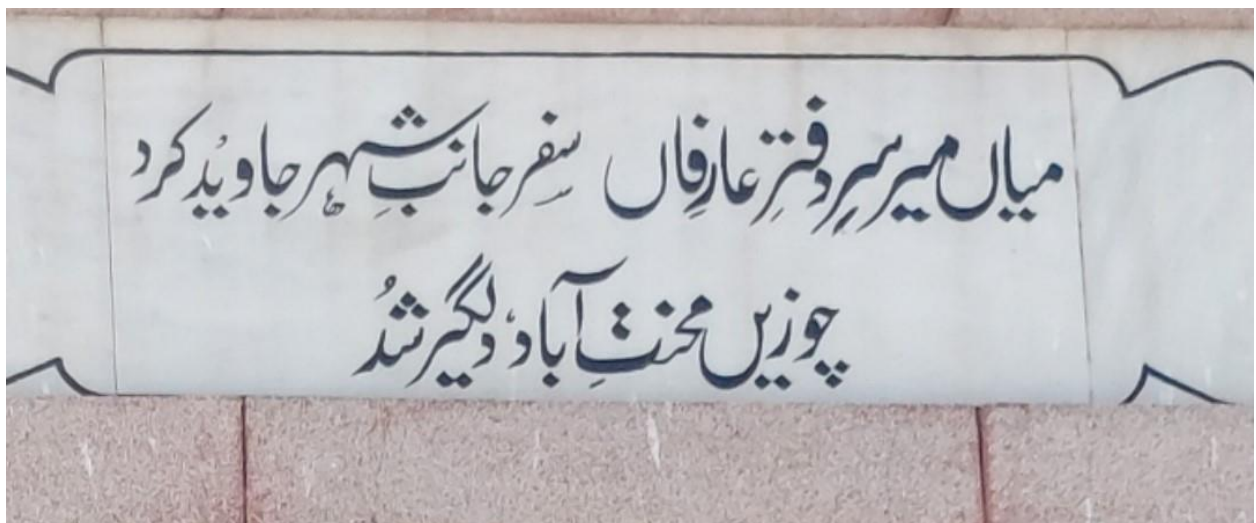
“That Miyan Miri who was old (peer) guider of people. The year of his birth Miyan Miri, but Righteous.”



This inscription of Persian poetry can be seen when one is exiting the shrine. Its translation is:

First Line: He himself wrote for/about his age and connections /associations, the soil of his door became the rishk (jealousy) of elixir.

Second Line: He became Miyan Mir for the Great Firdows (paradise)



This inscription is also Persian poetry and is adjacent to the previous scripture which can be seen when exiting the shrine. It is translated as:

“Mian Mir become the head officer of mystics, traveled towards the eternal City –

As he became bored/offended from this MihnatAbad (made of hardwork).”

Shrine Project Transcription

Me: What can you tell me about the *Kalaam* recited at this shrine?

Caretaker: Mian Mir was not a very poetic person, and hence, did not come up with a *Kalaam* of his own. He would listen to the *Kalaam* recited by the *Qawwals* at that time; however, he would not regularly invite them as he was not of this spiritual genealogy. He belonged to Qadri school of thought, and this is why he has no specific *Kalaam* of his own.

On Thursdays, *Qawwals* visit the shrine and recite the *Kalaam* written by Baba Bulley Shah, Shah Hussein Sarkar and Maadhu Laal to name a few. The *Qawwals* recite the “Sufiana *Kalaam*” written by religious saints.

Me: What do you mean by “Sufiana *Kalaam*”?

Caretaker: “Sufiana *Kalaam*” consists of “Tasawuf”, propagation of peace and the message of Allah and His Prophet (PBUH). To better the society by inculcating Islamic values, they used this “Sufiana *Kalaam*”. These religious saints played a vital role in the spread of Islam in Asia. This region was generally occupied by Hindus and their customs and traditions were oriented around music and poetry. This is why these saints also adopted *Qawwalis* and poetry as a method to spread the message of Islam.

Me: So, to get things straight, Mian Mir has no *Kalaam* of his own?

Caretaker: NO.

Me: And the *Kalaam* recited at this shrine is of other Sufi saints such as Baba Bulley Shah?

Caretaker: Exactly, Baba Bulley Shah and many others like Waris Shah and Madhu Laal.

Me: Why do people come to this shrine to make their wish-prayers?

Caretaker: Basically, people come to the shrine for spiritual peace. Even in the Quran, Allah Almighty says, he who becomes Mine, I become His. When we turn to Allah and work to spread His message, it results in His happiness. These saints have provided people with guidance which is why people come to visit them. These saints used to spread the true essence of the message of Islam. People nowadays have come up with their own ways to follow Islam and if one was to truly follow the way of life propounded by these saints then one would find spiritual peace as well as blessings.

Me: Do people recite the Quran and (I was interrupted before I could complete my sentence)

Caretaker: The people who come here all pay their respects in their own individual manners. Some recite the Quran, some offer *Nafl* prayers and some only make supplications.

Me: When the Qawwals come, does it result in a ceremony?

Caretaker: When the Qawwals come on Thursday, they perform from Asr till Isha, a stage has been made for them where they sit and recite the *Kalaam*.

Me: What is your belief in this shrine?

Caretaker: We are simply employed by the government, so we are simply fulfilling the duty that has been assigned to us.

Me: Do you have any personal feelings with respect to the shrine?

Caretaker: What can I say, there may be some personal feelings (when he said this, he took a long pause and looked visibly uncomfortable as if he wanted to change the topic).

Me: What can you tell me about the saint's history?

Caretaker: Mian Mir was born in Sindh, and he migrated here from Sindh at the age of 25. He started preaching Islam and bringing people to the path of Allah. Sikhs are also closely attached to Mian Mir. When the Golden Temple was constructed in India, it would always fall due to some reason. The Guru at that time, Guru Ajandev, had a dream about Mian Mir. In this dream he saw that when Mian Mir, who resides in Lahore will lay the foundation to the temple it will not fall. Seeing this, they came to Lahore and took Mian Mir with them to India. There, he laid the foundation for the temple, and Mian Mir lay the last brick in a tilted manner. However, the contractor straightened it out. When the Guru found out about this, he was extremely annoyed and predicted that the temple would fall again. Soon after, when Ahmad Shah Abdali conquered that area, the temple was destroyed and then rebuilt later. From this we can see that these religious saints have innate knowledge bestowed upon them from Allah.

(This was followed by a short pause, as he looked at me expectantly for my next question)

Me: Who are the people that regularly visit the shrine? (I asked this with respect to religious orientation and social status)

Caretaker: Everyone loves religious saints, and so people of all sorts come here to pay their respects. Christians and Sikhs also come here. Sikhs are especially frequent to come because of the incident I just narrated to you. They have some ceremony called “Guru Nanak Mela”, I’m not sure of the exact name, but after their participation in that ceremony they always make sure to come here as they considered this a part of their ritual.

Me: Religious orientation has nothing to do with the people who visit here?

Caretaker: Absolutely.

Me: Do you know what the Sikh people recite when they visit the shrine?

Caretaker: They have no specific *Kalam*, they simply pray in silence and they are the ones who know best what they recite. (He said this with a chuckle)

Me: They don't recite the Quran right?

Caretaker: No no not at all, we are also forbidden from giving them the Quran even if they ask for it, as their religious ideology is not congruent with our own. (Followed by a short pause)

Another interesting fact about the shrine is that the tomb you see is not where the body is buried. The body is actually buried underneath the shrine in another tomb in the basement. However, the pathway to that is restricted and nobody is allowed there.

Me: Have you ever been to see it?

Caretaker: No, that pathway was blocked long before I started working here.

Me: Thank you so much for your time, you have helped me greatly by answering all of my questions.

Caretaker: No worries, it was my pleasure speaking with you.

Discussion

This was my first time visiting a shrine, and I had many existing pre-conceptions regarding shrines, despite never having visited them myself. Before my visit to the shrine, I made sure to identify these biases and to uncover what experiences in my life they were rooted in. One of the main reasons for me having a stigmatized approach towards shrines was the association of shrine culture with drug culture. Growing up, I had heard all sorts of stories of how shrines simply used religion and spirituality as a front and were actually undercover hubs for open drug use. Before beginning my shrine project, I was talking to a friend of mine and asking for his opinion regarding what shrine I should visit for a culturally rich experience. My question was met with a look of disdain and when I asked him why his expressions changed that way, he narrated his own personal shrine experience. He told me a story of how he went to a shrine to attend an “Urs” i.e. death anniversary. The main crux of the story was that he arrived at the shrine and found that almost all the people present at the shrine were smoking hash (a form of cannabis commonly found in Pakistan) and that a little while after his arrival three drunken policemen arrived at the scene. According to him, these policemen were visibly drunk and you could smell the liquor on them even if you weren’t in close proximity with them. He then told me how this created a scene at the shrine and resulted in the eruption of a big fight as it is considered not only disrespectful but also sacrilegious to visit a shrine in a drunken state. Seeing all this unfold, my friend decided to leave the venue there and then, as he did not want to get caught up in any further commotion and also decided that he would never visit a shrine again.

Personally, I found the whole experience he narrated to be quite humorous and interesting. However, the experience he narrated was congruent with my existing preconception of shrine culture and its relationship with drug culture. Keeping this in mind, I realized that I was

going into the research with a close-minded approach as my prejudice had already been fortified before even starting any form of research myself. Psychology talks of an idea called “Inattentional Blindness”, which purports the idea that due to our attention being subverted, we fail to see highly visible objects (Mack, 2003). Having studied this concept previously, I was worried that my preconceived notions about shrine culture would shroud my ability to see beyond them and resultantly limit my experience. To combat this issue, I made a conscious effort to mitigate my bias and go into the experience with an open mind, in order to absorb and retain the maximum amount of information.

Another factor which caused me to have preconceptions regarding shrines was my upbringing. Throughout my developmental years, shrines were never really discussed in our families and upon instigating a discussion, the topic was usually shut down. This was for a number of reasons. As I have mentioned above, shrine culture is greatly stigmatized due to its association with drugs and going to shrines is considered to be unsafe by a vast majority of people. The other aspect which plays a monumental role in this is the religious aspect. The two main schools of thought are that either Tawassul (a means that can be used to get closer to God) exists or it does not. People who believe in the idea of Tawassul are those who regularly visit shrines to pay their respects and to make their supplications to God through the saint. The people who do not believe in Tawassul consider making a supplication to God via an external source such as a saint to be a form of Shirk (polytheism). This belief is predicated on the logic that you are making that supplication to someone other than God, which is the foundation of polytheism.

In addition to this, I personally believed that going to pray in shrines was apophenic to an extent. To highlight this idea, one can imagine that a person goes to a shrine and prays for a son. If that person then has a son, he tends to relate it with his visit to the shrine. Due to this

correlation being formed in people's head when his son's birth could easily be explained using the laws of heredity and probability, my belief that shrines were actually a scam was further strengthened.

After careful consideration of all these biases, I concluded that to actually gain something from this experience I would have to be very mindful of them. Throughout my visit, I consciously made an effort to always keep an open mind at whatever I got to hear or see during my time there. During the interview, there were some ideas purported by the caretaker regarding the whole concept of the shrine which seemed a little far-fetched but rather than dismissing them, I accepted them and paid close attention to whatever was being said.

Upon arrival at the shrine, I noticed that my first preconception regarding drug use was diminished. I found that the shrine was mostly empty and the people who were at the shrine were all there for religious reasons. Whoever was at the shrine was either praying in the mosque within the shrine or was reciting Fatiha for the departed saint. The caretaker I got to meet with was also a very learned and decent man.

During my interview, one of the first things I learnt was that not every shrine has its own specific Kalaam. I learnt that the Qawwals performing on every Thursday, recited verses from those saints who had actually come up with some form of poetry. I also learnt that these religious saints are mainly remembered due to their good deeds and closeness to God.

Another preconception I had regarding shrines was that shrines were simply constructed as a means to remember these religious saints; however, I got to learn that some shrines, like the one I visited were looked after by the government and how all of the people working there were actually government employees. I previously believed that shrines were simply a sacred place for

people and that the caretaker was a person belonging to the saint's family. However, in my interview I got to learn that this shrine is maintained by the government and all of the employees are court-appointed.

In addition to all of this, I discovered that the people visiting shrines were not exclusively Muslims. People from all religious backgrounds came to visit these shrines and this resulted in my realization that shrine culture is not simply limited to Islam but is a part of the sub-continental culture. As seen in the interview, people from India come to visit the shrine and pay their respects to Mian Mir, which shows that they also have a deep sense of respect for the saint and irrespective of their religious ideology, they believe in the importance of visiting the shrine.

Throughout my visit at the shrine, I was constantly expecting to see some form of strange rituals being practiced there as I was under the impression that those people who regularly visit shrines are part of a cult of some sort. However, I found that this was also simply a prejudice of mine based on hearsay and media representation of shrines. During my visit, the only thing I observed was that people prayed, recited the Quran or paid their respects and left within minutes. There was nothing out of the ordinary going on there in any way. I also worried that I would be coerced into giving a financial donation of some kind, in exchange for "blessings"; however, this situation did not arise at all.

Looking back at the whole experience, I realized I got to learn a lot about myself due to this visit to the shrine. One of the fundamental realizations I had was that I was absolutely oblivious with respect to an entire subculture which was quite popular in Lahore. The main reason for my ignorance was that I never made the effort to actually visit a shrine myself and to find out what the experience is about. By simply relying on what I heard people say about shrines and the media's portrayal of shrines I had formed very incorrect opinions regarding them.

Although I am still skeptical of the whole idea that if you pray for something in the shrine, you are more likely to receive it as the saint has a special connection with God, I do believe now that there may be some light to this ideology. The caretaker mentioned how people with all sorts of problems visit the shrine regularly and how their problems get resolved after making their prayers. The idea does seem a bit apophenic, however, after observing how people were absolutely committed to making their prayers and the deep sense of respect everyone at the shrine had for the saint, one does tend to entertain the possibility of there being some truth to it.

Another valuable insight from this experience is one that is applicable to my whole life. I've realized that there are so many things in life which I refused to experience, simply due to my existing biases against it. Considering how almost every single one of my preconceptions were proven wrong during this shrine project, the idea of putting aside my subjective ideas regarding things and actually experiencing them firsthand is one I will apply moving forward with my life.

Photography



Board at the Entrance with Mian Mir's History



Entrance





First View of the Mosque



Entrance of the Tomb



The tomb of Mian Mir



Interior surrounding of Tomb



View of Mosque from the Tomb



Interior of the Mosque



Names of Allah inscribed at the shrine



Names of Allah inscribed at the Shrine



Library under Renovation



Stall setup at the Shrine



Back entrance of the Shrine



View while exiting the shrine

References

Mack, A. (2003). Inattention blindness: Looking without seeing. *Current directions in psychological science*, 12(5), 180-184.