

Experiences of Pakistani Women Visiting Barī Imām Shrine

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Abstract

Background. Shrines are very important in Pakistan because they provide sacred space for worshipping and communal congregations, especially for women who participate in practices based on religion, culture, and social norms. The research will focus on understanding the belief systems and practices governing experiences related to visiting shrines that embody a true reflection of cultural significance for such sites.

Method. Using a qualitative approach, interviews with 16 women aged 25 to 35 who frequently visit the Imam Bari shrine were conducted in Islamabad, Pakistan. Interviews in Urdu were executed through Braun and Clarke's thematic method of analysis in 2012. Transcripts and field notes detailed numerous types of experiences and varying perspectives associated with shrine visitation.

Results. Participants described deep connection with the divine through rituals and prayers to receive blessings, guidance, and healing at the shrine. Many reported that they experienced peace and tranquility and solace in the shrine's spiritual atmosphere.

Conclusion. The study emphasized empowerment and resilience in women since the shrine community accepts, unites, and offers them the opportunity for mutual support and emotional expression. Moreover, it had a strong link with the cultural traditions and ancestral customs as well as familial obligation. Awareness of these beliefs and practices would provide an understanding to the cultural legacy and social significance of shrine visitation among women in Pakistani society.

Keywords: Spiritual devotion, Cultural significance, Empowerment, Cultural heritage, Ancestral customs



Introduction

Shrines play a significant role in Pakistan's cultural and religious traditions, acting as centers for spiritual devotion and community gathering (Charan et al., 2018). Women, in particular, are deeply connected to these sacred spaces, engaging in rituals that reflect a harmonious blend of religious, cultural, and social values (Jassal & Akcapar, 2019). Throughout Pakistan, shrines dedicated to saints and spiritual leaders attract countless visitors who seek blessings, solace, and guidance. For many women, visiting a shrine is more than a religious act—it is a deeply personal and meaningful experience. Rooted in Sufi teachings, these visits highlight themes of love, devotion, and a spiritual connection with the divine (Aftab, 2022). This study explores the beliefs and practices of women who frequent the Imam Bari Shrine in Islamabad, delving into the cultural significance of these revered sites.

One of the key motivations for women visiting shrines is their belief in the saints' ability to intercede with Allah on their behalf. Women often pray for health, fertility, protection, and prosperity, reinforcing their faith and hope through these visits (Glik, 1988). The rituals performed at shrines—such as reciting prayers, offering flowers, lighting candles or lamps, burning incense, tying votive threads or padlocks, and circumambulating the shrine—are expressions of devotion and gratitude. These acts symbolize a profound spiritual connection with the saint (Charan et al., 2020). Furthermore, shrines serve as spaces for social interaction, allowing women to build connections, find support, and foster solidarity within the community (Canel-Çınarbaş et al., 2012).

Women may visit in groups, forming networks of mutual assistance and companionship or singly if they seek or wish to re-establish social support. Shrine visitations therefore are not only a religious act but are social and cultural events that strengthen community ties and foster a sense of belongingness (Osterberg, 2018) shaped by regional traditions, cultural norms, and individual interpretations of religious teachings (Richards, 2021). Role of shrines in Pakistani society have evolved over time, intersecting with broader sociopolitical, and economic factors which affect both genders, however little attention is given to women visits to shrines in Pakistan. To investigate this lesser-known area and understand its sociocultural complexities that include gender, religion, and identity (Ahmad, 2022), we carried out a qualitative study on women and their visitation to Barī Imām Shrine.

Barī Imām or Barī Sarkār or Syed Abdul Latif Kazmi Qadri was a 17th Century (1617-1705) ascetic Muslim Sufi saint, who today is revered as the patron saint of Islamabad, Pakistan. Born in Karsal, Chakwal District, Barī Imām followed the Qadiriyya Sufi order of the Islamic spirituality and died in Noorpur Shahan in Islamabad, where the shrine exists today. A silver-mirrored shrine of Barī Imām was originally built by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, in the 17th century was renovated many times to its present architectural form, maintained today by the Government of Pakistan. Thousands of people visit the shrine every day, and the attendance grows to hundreds of thousands of people during his *urs* death anniversary (May 24) celebrations of the saint (till 1960). It has been reported (Azam, 2021), on one such occasion 1.2 million people visited the shrine.

Method

Sample

A qualitative research design was used with a sample of 16 women, aged 25 to 35 years, who regularly visited the shrine of Barī Imām once a month, were included in the study. The recruited participants resided in poor neighborhoods near the shrine and were willing to participate voluntarily in the research. Their socioeconomic background and monthly shrine visits were important factors in understanding their experiences and engagement with the shrine in this study.

Table 1			
<i>Demographic Characteristics of the Participants</i>			
Alias	Age	Education	Employment
MF	25	Inter	House wife
FZ	23	Inter	Housewife
NA	34	B.A with diploma	Teacher
NY	20	Matric	Housewife
MA	28	Uneducated	House Cleaner
LN	25	BA	Receptionist
MN	29	B.A	Clerk
AK	32	M.Phil.	Admin officer
AI	35	MBA	Banker
WK	34	Master	Teacher
TB	27	Master	Nurse
NI	28	Inter	Housewife
JF	25	B.S	Mid wife
HA	21	Matric	Cook
AR	33	B.S	Nurse

Design and Procedure

A semi-structured interview (see appendix) was developed to explore the beliefs of women who regularly visit the shrine of Barī Imām. The interview guide was based on prior research and discussions with the supervisor, then reviewed by three experts who provided suggestions for refinement.

Consent from the participants were obtained both verbally and in writing and were interviewed at the shrine. The interviews approximately lasted for two hours and covered demographic information, “beliefs” about shrine visits, and additional questions that were part of the interview for deeper insights, some of these questions emerged during the interview (see

appendix). Answers were analyzed by using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), which involved transcribing the interviews (Urdu), utilizing both handwritten notes and audio recordings, translating the responses, and follow-up questions that needed clarifications. Themes were identified and subsequently grouped into sub-themes. A second author carefully reviewed the transcript to verify the themes and ensure the accuracy of the findings. Common themes were extracted from the interview transcripts and classified as major themes. The analysis was further reviewed by three experts who validated the study’s results and provided suggestions, which were incorporated into the final analysis.

Results

Table 2

Codes, subthemes and themes Extracted for Interviews

Code	Subtheme	Theme
"ہر دفعہ مزار پر جانے کے بعد بڑا سکون ملتا ہے (ایم ایف)۔"	Peace at the shrine.	Divine Connection.
"مزار مشکل لمحات میں طاقت اور رہنمائی دیتا ہے (ایف زی)۔"	Proximity to the saint and his peaceful presence.	
"مزار پر غور و فکر کا موقع ملتا ہے۔ جب جب میں دعا کرتی ہوں روحانی طور پر تازہ دم اور مضبوط ہو کر نکلتی ہوں (این اے)۔"	Asking intercession by saint.	Connection with Allah.
"جب مجھے کسی مشکل کا سامنا کرتا ہوں تو میں اکثر دعا سے آغاز کرتی ہوں اور خدا سے رہنمائی اور طاقت کی دعا کرتی ہوں۔ میں کچھ اس طرح کہتی ہوں، 'یا اللہ، مجھے اس صورت حال کا سامنا کرنے کی حکمت اور ہمت عطا فرما اور صحیح راستے کی	Prayers and invocations to Allah.	
	Problems presented to God.	

رہنمائی فرما۔' اس سے مجھے ٹھہراؤ اور سہارا
محسوس ہوتا ہے (WK)۔"

"There is a great feeling of peace after each visit (MF)." "The shrine provides strength and direction during difficult moments in life (FZ)."

"The visits to the are opportunities for reflection and rejuvenation. I engage in prayer and emerge feeling refreshed spiritually and empowered (NA)."

"When I face challenges or difficult situations, I often start by praying and asking for God's guidance and strength. I say something like, 'God, please give me the wisdom and courage to navigate this situation and help me find the right path. This helps me feel more centered and supported (HA)."

"I sit quietly and find comfort in the belief that the shrine's divine presence will provide me guidance and solace (JI)."

"when I am here, I feel connected to something greater than myself, which provides a sense of spiritual renewal and strength (AK)."

"I feel a comfort as I enter the shrine and find all the confusion has gone away that I feel every moment of life (NY)."

"When I come here, I converse with Allah and seek forgiveness; my heart always comes at peace. It feels like my negative emotions are released, and my soul is purified (LN) [interpreted as catharsis].

"I seek forgiveness for my sins and ask for guidance towards the righteous path (AI)."

"I feel profoundly peaceful and enlightened when I leave the shrine (AR)."

Peace and calmness.
Experiencing catharsis and self-realization.
Emotional purification.

Inner Contentment and Tranquility.

"A visit to shrine provide me with strength and direction during difficult moments in my life (FZ)."

"When I face challenges or difficult situations, I often start by praying and asking for God's guidance and strength. I might say something like, 'God, please give me the wisdom and

Spiritual intercession and mediation.
Financial Struggles and Spiritual Support.
Gender-Specific Empowerment.

Empowerment and Resilience Through Spiritual Practices

courage to navigate this situation and help me find the right path.' This helps me feel more centered and supported (MA)."

"When I come to the shrine, it feels like I'm finally being heard. Outside, in my family or community, my voice doesn't matter much, but here, I'm part of something bigger. The other women understand me, and the Sufi saints give me strength. I feel respected and valued, which is rare for a woman in my society (participant TB)."

"At the shrine, I find a sense of belonging that I don't feel anywhere else. It's like a second home where no one judges me or makes me feel small. We all share our stories, support each other, and that gives me the strength to keep going in a world that doesn't always appreciate women's worth (participant FZ)."

"These visits sometimes help find solutions to our problems, and bring a short period of peace through sharing experiences with other visitors (NI)."

Social Bond

Social connectedness

"When I visit the shrine, I not only come to pray but also talk to other women facing similar challenges. It's comforting to know I'm not alone, and sometimes their advice, or just hearing their stories, helps me gain clarity with my own struggles(NY)."

"I visit the shrine regularly to honor the customs of my ancestors. This practice has been passed down through my family for generations, and I feel it is my duty to keep this tradition alive, respecting the legacy of those who came before me (JF)."

Fulfilling Sacred Obligations.
Honoring Ancestral Customs.

Cultural Traditions

"Visiting the shrine is a tradition in our family that has been upheld for decades. Our elders have always advised us to continue this practice throughout our lives. It is a way of making our ancestors happy and honoring their memory, ensuring that our cultural practices endure (FZ)."

Divine Connections

The results of the study reveal that participants visited the Bari Imam shrine primarily to seek spiritual connection, guidance, and solace. The rituals and practices performed by women at these sacred sites serve as physical expressions of their faith, gratitude, and devotion, creating a profound spiritual connection between the worshiper and the divine (Ghadially, 2005)

Inner Contentment and Tranquility

Women visit shrines to find a sense of inner peace and calmness. They believe that the spiritual environment and rituals performed there contribute to their emotional well-being. Women often visit shrines seeking a sense of inner peace and tranquility, believing that the spiritual atmosphere and rituals performed at these sites enhance their emotional well-being. Each visit brings a profound sense of calm and connection to something larger than themselves, leaving them feeling renewed and strengthened (Massam, 2021).

Empowerment and Resilience

The third emergent theme was empowerment and resilience through spiritual connection. support, and manage stress more effectively. Spiritual connections are particularly powerful in fostering resilience by helping individuals feel connected to something greater than themselves, which can reinforce their sense of purpose and inner strength. Engaging in spiritual rituals and connecting with a faith community can also provide social support, which further enhances emotional resilience (Flemming & Ladogar, 2010). Even it was evident in another studies through prayers, offerings, and acts of devotion, women express their hopes and intentions to acquire financial stability, prosperity and feel themselves empowered (Charan et al, 2020).

Social Connectedness

Shown, shrines frequently serve as spaces for the public, where they gather to socialize with people who share in the same values and believe in the same thing. According to research, visiting shrines leads women to often feel socially attached by associating with a social environment through which they connect to others with a similar belief system. This social bonding is secured through shared rituals, collective prayers, and mutual beliefs that strengthen the social bonding by adding emotional support to it. For example, studies on the Hazrat Mian Mir shrine visitors in Pakistan highlight that the shrines act as inclusive platforms where these people from different

walks of life are all coming together to not only strengthen community bonding but also spiritual bonding among the worshippers. This feeling of belonging by spiritual congregations enables women to feel part of a larger supportive (Abbas et al., 2013).

Cultural Traditions

Visits to shrines carry deep cultural connotations in most societies, echoing traditions that have been passed down over generations. In most of these practices, women play pivotal roles, where they honor family obligations and sustain cultural heritage. These visits may include paying homage to the ancestors, participating in communal rituals, or any other activity that reaffirms family relationships and cultural identity (Hegland, 2003; Ali, 2006). Through such meaningful engagements, shrines become spaces for women to uphold customs while nurturing a sense of both personal and community connection. no plagiarism

Discussion

The results show that participants visit shrines very often for deepening spiritual relationships, seeking guidance, and finding comfort. This is in line with studies showing that shrines offer a space where people can experience an intimate relationship with the divine, thereby fulfilling their spiritual needs. Women often perform rituals that reflect their belief and conviction, thus drawing closer to the sacred and gaining solace during difficult periods (Ghadially, 2005). The shrines therefore become locations for prayer and meditation, following a similar model as in the South Asian traditions of spirituality (Hegland, 2003; Ali, 2006).

Each time participants visited a shrine, they reported feeling deep within their inner selves and renewed. Such feelings of serenity were thought to improve emotional well-being. Many participants believe that the serene setting of shrines helps in their emotional struggle; indeed, studies have proven this, showing how the peaceful surroundings of shrines promote emotional awareness and reduce stress, leading to better mental well-being (Massam, 2021; Flemming & Ladogar, 2010).

A powerful theme in the study was the empowerment and resilience that women felt through spiritual practices at shrines. Multiple participants said these practices helped them face day-to-day challenges and really manage stress quite well. In fact, research speaks to the resilience that spiritual practices can foster through connecting people to something bigger, giving them a sense of purpose, and reinforcing inner

strength. Charan et al. (2020) find that shrine visits empower women, especially in the provision of economic stability and emotional security as a result of collective rituals and offerings.

Shrines also become social places through which visitors can interact with other people holding the same belief, thus fostering social relationships. This is important for women since other settings may have fewer opportunities in this aspect. For example, studies on the Hazrat Mian Mir shrine in Pakistan revealed that women visiting shrines are likely to experience a sense of community because shared rituals foster emotional support and social cohesion (Abbas et al., 2013).

This further solidifies the cultural significance of shrine visits since they also happen to be generational. Women take central roles in many of these shrine visits, where they tend to merge the same with visits to ancestors and discharge family duties. Such activities have been proved to be rooted within family and community values and, as such, assist in preserving cultural heritage and building up a common sense of identity (Hegland, 2003; Ali, 2006). As a result, shrines are personal spaces for spiritual communion but also community spaces where women celebrate and worship their identity through meaningful rituals.

The visits to the shrines are important as they help preserve cultural and religious heritage in building community identity, according to Hegland (2003) and Ali (2006). This pilgrimage to shrines due to empowerment and solidarity with other women also leads to some strong social support networks that strengthen resilience and improvement in mental wellbeing (Flemming & Ladogar, 2010; Charan et al., 2020). The peaceful emotional healing found within the participants suggests that there are therapeutic advantages from spiritual activities and that such aspects should be part of the mental health programs (Massam, 2021). These findings support the interface of culture traditions and religious beliefs in a broader context of society and health policies. Recognition of the role played by women can further help design gender-sensitive policies that may suit their psychological and social needs.

This study is very insightful concerning the beliefs and practices of Pakistani women shrine visitors. Still, it is not free of limitations either. First, the study was conducted on women aged 25 to 36 who were regular visitors to the Imam Bari shrine, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other age groups and shrine locations. The study is

qualitative in nature; hence, it may not represent all the different experiences and views of female shrine visitors. Future research studies can use more quantitative techniques or greater numbers of participants to construct a more inclusive, all-embracing knowledge about shrines in Pakistan. This is also an area where this study has failed to provide perspectives of religious leaders and male shrine visitors who may bring forth valuable information in gender relations and power play of shrine societies.

Conclusion

This study shows how shrine visits are a profound spiritual experience of connection, emotional well-being, and social bonding. As with other international studies, the experiences of participants in seeking divine guidance, inner peace, and strengthening community bonds are consistent with this study. Reiteration of such themes underscores the universal significance of sacred spaces as a source of empowerment, resilience, and cultural continuity. These findings therefore emphasize the importance of spiritual practices in personal and communal life in any culture.

Declaration

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Conflict of Interest. Authors of this study have no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Approval. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethical review board prior to data collection and informed consent was taken from the participants before data collection.

Competing Interest. The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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