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Exploring the Experiences of Women on Muslim Pilgrimage: A Study of Hazaratbal Shrine in Kashmir

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The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of women at Hazaratbal shrine in Kashmir also known as Madinat-ul-Sani (second Madina). In spite of growing interest of scholars in sacred tourism research, little efforts are made to examine female perception of holy shrine experiences. The authors collected data through interviews and participant observation of female pilgrims/visitors, at the shrine. The theoretical base of the study is the phenomenological work of Schultz. After the completion of analysis, five main categories of perceptions appeared which attract women visitors to Hazaratbal shrine namely prayer and worship, thanksgiving, healing, learning and heritage.

Key Words: experience, perception, Muslim, shrine pilgrimage, women

Introduction

The Muslims of Kashmir believe in their own version of Islam. This area is different from the Middle East, where Islam emerged. In all spheres of life in Kashmir like religious, social, artistic, there is a harmonious blend of two cultures - Islamic and Indian. The heterogenic Islamic traits and orthogenic Hindu traits have imparted a peculiar charm, freshness and vigour, leading to a unity of people in a confluence of great Asian culture (Pandit, 1997). A person in Kashmir irrespective of caste, colour, creed, gender, age, religion or region demonstrates utter devotion towards holy shrines. Kashmir is the land of holy shrines of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. You will not find a single patch of land which is not holy to the people of Kashmir (Lawrence, 1967).

Hazaratbal Shrine is the largest holy site in Kashmir in terms of attracting people at a local, regional, national and international level. Both males and females are allowed to visit and perform rituals at the Shrine. The reason for its popularity at National and International level is the presence of holy an important relic - the hair of Prophet Mohammad S.A.W. The grand Masjid of Hazaratbal is

an impressive building which is said to resemble the structure of Masjid Nabi (the Mosque of the Prophet SAW¹) in Medina (Mir, 1983; Pandit, 1997).

A range of reliable literature is available on beliefs and practices associated with the Muslim shrines of Kashmir (e.g. Mir, 1983; Anwar, 1985; Amin, 2001; Dewan, 2013; Dar, 2008) and Hazaratbal Shrine. However, there is limited literature available on female perceptions of holy shrine experiences in the area. Andriotis (2009) has suggested that despite the bulk of literature on holy shrine visitation, the major dimensions which explain the nature of a sacred shrine experience have not yet been fully identified. In seeking to tackle this latter issue and to consider the absence of the female perspective, the present explores the female experience of holy shrine visitation through the eyes of an interpretative approach.

The main reason behind the selection of Hazaratbal shrine for the purpose of study is its historical legacy in the valley of Kashmir. First, visitors in large numbers come to the Shrine every day with varied expectations and experiences. They leave their day to day profane affairs of life to spend quality time at the shrine. Such travel

1 Islam uses a number of conventions to indicate respect or prayer when referring to individuals or places. SAW / S.A.W. or 'peace be upon him' is typically used after uttering the name of Muhammad; RA (used later in this paper) refers to important historic and contemporary Muslims.

adheres to the idea of Turner (1978), that pilgrimage typically involves a stage of liminality, in which pilgrims find themselves in a transitory stage between two established social statuses. Cohen (1992) and Eliade's (1959) ideas also apply to this site - this is the 'centre of the world', through which passes the 'axis mundi' which is characterised by blessing and stability, while outside of the sacred space is characterised by instability and chaos.

Second, apart from religious purposes, people like to visit Hazaratbal shrine for secular and aesthetic purposes. Third, the shrine is in the middle of the city of Srinagar on the banks of world famous Dal Lake. There is a broad spectrum of visitors reflecting the multiple motivations of travellers, whose interests and activities can vary from pilgrimage to tourism and vice versa (Smith 1992). Finally, in terms of justifying the study area, the shrine is open for both male as well as female visitors. There is no restriction for devotees in the performance of religious rituals and practices.

Figure 1: Muslim Women at Hazaratbal Shrine



Source: Authors

Figure 2: Auspicious Day for Displaying holy Relic at Hazaratbal Shrine, Kashmir



Source: Authors

Study Area

Pilgrimage is one of the oldest types of travel and a worldwide phenomenon of religious history (Vijayanand, 2012). The visitation of sacred shrines had existed for many hundreds of years before the phenomenon of tourism appeared in human behaviour (Fleisher 2000).

Hazaratbal Shrine is situated at an altitude of 5250 feet on the western bank of world famous Dal Lake. It has the geometrical position of 34° 5'N and 74° 5'E. The location of this Shrine is an ideal place for catching the most panoramic views of Dal Lake (Dar 2007). Inside the shrine is the holy relic of Prophet Mohammad (S.A.W.) which was brought to Kashmir by Khawja Noor-ur-din, a business man from Srinagar. He offered money to Syed Abdullah Madani, a purported descendant of the Prophet the Middle East; in exchange he was gifted the Relic (Fida 1997).

The Shrine building is made of pure marble and is similar to the structure of Masjid Nabi (SAW). The Muslims of

Kashmir are spiritually connected with it. The Holy Relic has been deposited in a casket and displayed on several important occasions every year.

Hindu, Muslim, Sikhs, in fact, Kashmiri of any religion, of both sexes, and of all ranks and ages, are there for the purpose of seeing and being seen, praying for their wishes and getting their wishes fulfilled (Dar 2007:83).

The shrine has a capacity to accommodate more than 1.5 lakh devotees at one time (150,000). In 2018 this number of devotees was achieved when visitors thronged to the revered shrine throughout the day (Greater Kashmir, 10 Nov: 2018).

Eid Milad-un-Nabi

People in Kashmir celebrate Eid-Milad-un-Nabi every year on 12 and 13 Rabiul Awal and following the Friday of the Islamic Calendar (Lunar Calendar). This religious festival is organised in memory of the birthday of Prophet Mohammad (SAW). The largest congregation of people is at Hazratbal Shrine, where pilgrims from across Kashmir gather to offer special prayers and have a look at the holy relic of Prophet Muhammad.

Meraj- ul- Alam

People in Kashmir participate in Meraj- ul- Alam every year on 27 and 28 Rajab and the following Friday of Islamic Calendar (Lunar Calendar). Devotees throughout the day and night pray for their successful life as they commemorate a day that commemorate Prophet Muhammad's night-time tour of the heavens. They come to the Shrine from different areas of Kashmir.

Abu Bakar Al-Siddiq (RA)

Abu Bakar (RA) the first Muslim Caliph ruled from 632–634 CE (Adnan, 2015:90). He took over the political and administrative functions of the Muslim state after Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Abu Bakar's name was given the suffix of Al-Siddiq (The Truthful) person among the Muslims of succeeding generation. His anniversary is celebrated every year at the Hazratbal Shrine with religious zeal and veneration.

Umar Ibn Al-Khattab (RA)

Umar Ibn Al Khattab (RA) was the second caliph of Islam. He was a most powerful and Influential Muslim ruler. His relationship with Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was very close. Born in Mecca around 581 to the Adi clan of the Quraish tribe, Umar belonged to a middle-class family (Adnan, 2015:92). His anniversary is celebrated every year at the Hazratbal Shrine with religious zeal and veneration.

Uthman ibn Affan (RA)

Uthman ibn Affan (RA) was one of Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) closest companions and the fifth person who embraced Islam. Uthman became the third Caliph at 65 years old succeeding Umar ibn al-Khattab. Under his leadership, the Muslim empire expanded into Fars (present-day Iran), some areas of Khorasan (present-day Afghanistan) and Armenia. Some of Uthman's notable achievements included his economic reforms and the compilation of the Quran into the unified, authoritative text that is known today (Adnan, 2015:95). His anniversary is celebrated every year at the Hazratbal Shrine with religious enthusiasm and veneration.

Ali Ibn Talib (RA)

Ali Ibn Talib (RA) was Muhammad's (SAW) cousin and son-in-law. He ruled over the Islamic Caliphate from 656 to 661. A son of Abu Talib, Ali (RA) was Islam's first male convert and among Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) closest companions, Ali was most knowledgeable. He had vast knowledge of the Quran, and its interpretation. He was the best of all judges, and the most eloquent orator (i Adnan, 2015:96). His anniversary is celebrated every year at the Hazratbal Shrine with religious enthusiasm and veneration.

Phenomenological Understanding of Visitor Experiences

A Phenomenological perspective offers a radical alternative to positivist methodology (Haralambos & Held, 1980). The main thrust of phenomenology is how experiences create a sense of reality in the social world. Credit goes to Schultz for his ability to blend Husserl's

radical phenomenology with Weber's action theory and American interactionism (Turner, 2016). For him the most significant social reality is the creation and maintenance of intersubjectivity, or a common subjective world among a plurality of interacting individuals (Turner, 2016).

Most tourism and religious studies are based on positivistic techniques like Fleisher's work on 'tourist behind the pilgrim in the Holy Land' (Fleisher, 2000), or Cohen's 'Tourism and Religion: A Case Study-Visiting Students in Israeli Universities' (Cohen 2003). Positivistic oriented scholars have been criticised for their approach of reducing the complex nature of humans into mere statistics (Riley & Love, 2000).

Phenomenologists are of the view that Statistical numbers are not enough to fully understand meanings and experiences of visitors. Therefore, they suggest that a radical shift in tourism studies is needed. They use interpretive methodologies based on the notion that people have feelings, values and mindsets, and are able to give accurate accounts of all these (Mac Dermott, 2002:266). In contemporary tourism research, many studies are conducted from a Phenomenological perspective. It is obviously to mention some here as reference points like college students' experiences at heritage sites by Masberg and Silverman (1996), geographical consciousness influencing tourists' experiences by Li (2000) and most importantly the exploration of sacred site experience by Andriotis (2009).

A phenomenological approach seems appropriate in a discipline like tourism, where the focus is on understanding human experience and patterns of travel (Casmir, 1983). Using the above discussion as a back drop, the present study explores women visitors' experiences of Hazaratbal Shrine by adopting a phenomenological approach.

Methodology

The study seeks to explain the experiences of female visitors / pilgrims at Hazaratbal Shrine through interpretative perspective. For this purpose, the authors visited Hazaratbal Shrine on 21 occasions since 2017. The distance between the University campus (where the author is pursuing a PhD degree) and Hazaratbal Shrine is about 50 meters. This short distance provided an

opportunity to reveal new facts about the phenomenon. The first visit took place in December 2017 for the purpose of Friday prayers. This occasion sparked the idea of undertaking the research. Every Friday, Hazaratbal shrine is jam-packed with devotees from different regions of Kashmir to offer Zuhr Namaz (prayers). The first visit was not research oriented, but it started the seeds of an idea, which then slowly developed into the theme of the present study.

The author's second visit to the shrine was June 2018. The visit was planned for data collection. The reviewed literature influenced the researcher's interactions with respondents. The author stayed at the shrine throughout the day late into the night. The only motive was to observe the experience of women through professional eyes. Being a Muslim it was not so difficult to observe what female visitors / pilgrims were doing in the Shrine. Having the same cultural and semantic background helped the researcher to interpret the actions of females inside the shrine more accurately. To achieve the purpose of the study, the author, accompanied by female co-scholars initiated conversations with the respondents. Being a male it was not so easy. The conversations with the respondents started with simple descriptive questions like, 'it seems you are rural like me, how was your travel'; 'how do the custodians of the Shrine behave towards you' and; 'what motivates you to visit the shrine'. Five conversations took place. After that, the researcher tried to observe the respondent's actions at the shrine by following their prayer locations, where they ate and where they engaged in conversations. The author understood that visitor's feedback in the form of notes or diaries could help to understand the deep experiences of pilgrims/visitors. However, travel records of visitors were not available at the shrine.

Having undertaken the preliminary visits, a more structured approach was developed. The data for the present study were collected through structured interviews and direct observations. The focus of the study was to reveal Women's experiences at the shrine and explore what motivates women to visit Hazaratbal shrine. Direct observation helped to explore the apparent experiences of female visitor. In phenomenological research, close observation, where the researcher enters the 'world of immediate experience' (Husserl, 1970),

entails data gathering that remains natural and authentic (Sarantakos, 2005). All the data were collected and compiled through the use of a field book diary. The field notes were reviewed many times in order to minimise fluctuations and repetitions. The direct observation method took 13 months to complete. The data gathering process by the first author was undertaken with the help of their supervisor and friend scholars, who participated in the congregations of Eid Milad-un-Nabi, following by Friday prayers, Meraj- ul- Alam, followed by Friday prayers and 16 additional Friday prayers. The author tried to observe and capture the sacred experiences of women visitors at major sites in the shrine, but also as they undertook secular and profane activity (eating, chatting and travelling). In addition to detailed observation, 9 in-depth interactions with female visitors took place. Most respondents were rural female visitors who shared a number of common experiences with the author:

prayer and worship, purification and salvation, thanksgiving, healing, historical appreciation, learning.

What the researcher encountered above and beyond these experiences was

relaxation and entertainment.

Women's Experience

It is misleading to talk of one single travel experience, given the heterogeneous nature of the activity (Ryan, 2002) and the complex divergence of the concept (Hull, Michael, Walker & Roggenbuck, 1996). Visitor's motivations for travelling to Holy sites vary. These differences are manifested by different activities and behaviours (Andriotis 2009). Hazaratbal Shrine plays a significant role in the socio-cultural setup of Kashmir and thus, is part of the everyday a rush of people both male and female who like to travel to shrines with different motivations and expectation. The experiences of women cannot be limited to a single dimension. It becomes necessary for a researcher to divide the women's experiences into different forms, based on an analysis of the information collected from respondents. The varied forms of experiences have been divided into sacred experiences and profane experiences as follows:

Figure 3: Women Offering Friday Namaz at Hazaratbal Shrine in an open Park



Source: Authors

Sacred Experiences

The sacred experiences are categorised as prayers and worship, thanksgiving, and healing.

Prayer and worship

Certain religious places are believed to generate magnetism on peoples' consciousness (Dubisch, 1995); this force can be experienced in Hazaratbal Shrine. The majority of women visitors believe that the shrine has been gifted with supernatural power. The author conducted field notes and observations during the times of Urs (annual ceremony) and Friday prayers. It was found that most female visitors were pilgrims. Visitors to the shrine were affiliated with different schools of thought in Islam; in particular, the major sects in Kashmir such as Deobandis, Bralies and Ahlehadee prefer to participate in Urs at Hazaratbal Shrine. The primary observation is the females in the shrine offer prayers and worship individually and collectively. They are expressing their devotion by praying to Allah (God), offering Namaz, Nawafil and affectionately touching the icons of the

Shrine. Similar kind of activities was observed by the author during his multiple visits to the shrine. Women from different areas of Kashmir gather at the Shrine for the purpose of prayers. Their experience makes it more authentic and meaningful - worshipping at the shrine appeals more to them as an engagement with their God than praying at home. One respondent stated:

Participation and prayer at Hazaratbal Shrine strengthens our religious faith, group solidarity and conscious affiliations.

A similar point was highlighted by Belhassen, *et al.*, (2008) who postulate that pilgrimage experiences are essential to legitimise the experiences of a trip and to enhance one's identity with the place and to validate one's religious ideology.

Thanksgiving

The shrines in Kashmir are widely recognised sites of faith and have a strong reputation among the people. All pilgrims look at their shrines with awe and veneration. One female said,

We love shrines more than our lives.

People in Kashmir do not hesitate to sacrifice at the shrines which are dearest to them and they like to donate in spite having scarce resources (Mir, 1985). The author observed that in addition to prayers and worship, women's presence at the shrine highlights the notion of 'thanksgiving'. Both males and females are staunch followers of shrines. They believe shrines have a supernatural power to provide remedies for worldly challenges. The author observed from respondents that they are visiting to the shrine to offer special prayers (Mannat). It is very common among the women of Kashmir they make special prayers (Mannat) at shrines for the purpose of success in life, such as to achieve good grades in examinations, job and even for marriage proposals. One of the young lady told the author,

I had a problem of infertility; I consulted many doctors to give birth to children after marriage, but things were not moving well. Then I and my husband decided to visit Hazaratbal Shrine for prayers. The Shrine's divine power blessed us with a male baby. We are now so happy and joyful. Our purpose here is only to say thanks to God for such a miracle.

Healing

People believe that shrines have a power of healing. The women in Kashmir visit religious places for healing purposes also. They have profound faith that Hazaratbal can cure their illness be it physical or psychological. During my conversations with the visitors, I came to know how shrines cure their health issues. Informants shared with the author that worship individually or collectively can help to overcome illnesses. I observed that women used dust of the shrine on their body and considered dust of the shrine as auspicious and for them it has medicinal effects. Similar kind of beliefs were discussed by Eade (1996) in Lourdes France which is an attraction for millions of pilgrims per year, who see it as a place of healing. Lourdes has retained its power during the political, economic, social, and cultural turmoil in France. During the author's conversation with a family from a rural background, one of the old women told,

Hazaratbal Shrine is a divine gift to us. We are coming here to get rid of miseries of pragmatic world affairs. The Shrine has divine power to heal our health and wealth issues. We have experienced the divine power of the Shrine many times and the influence of collective prayers, these things motivate us to visit the shrine continuously.

Profane Experiences

Apart from the sacred experiences, women visitors to Hazaratbal shrine shared some motives that can be organised into profane categories of pilgrimage tourism. During the author's interaction with the visitors some divergence and dynamic aspects were observed within belief oriented travel. Some of the profane activities which they identified were heritage, learning and emergence of local markets. Rinschede (1992) considers religious tourism as a subgroup of cultural tourism, suggesting that differences between these two forms are not clearly definitive, but transitional forms that can be distinguished. In supporting this, he gives the example of Rome, where the religious sites are simultaneously significant cultural sites. Andriotis (2009) in Mount Athos notes that visitor feel impressed not only by the frescoes, but also by the precious gems, mosaics, art miniatures, old icons, ancient manuscripts and ecclesiastic utensils. These treasures are on display in the museums of the

monasteries that open only on special occasions and for proper devotees (Andriotis, 2009). Socialisation is also an essential element for many visitors to Shrines. As Singh remarks, the traditional function of pilgrimage is to integrate and reinforce or reproduce social relations among participants (2006). Thus,

Profane experiences are classified as learning, heritage and the emergence of local markets.

Heritage

The term heritage in relation to shrine tourism is linked to the realisation of visitors about the historical importance of sacred centres. The people in Kashmir consider all of their shrines and their visiting practices at the shrines, as a part of their cultural identity. One of the women visitors said,

visiting places of Rishies and Saints is a part of our historical legacy. For generations we are following it with religious motivations. We consider a visit to the shrines as a personal contribution towards our enlightened and inspiring past.

Learning

This study found that shrines in Kashmir are working as a specialised agency of socialisation. People, particularly women of Kashmir, travel to Hazaratbal shrine with their children. They believe these sacred centres are hubs of learning in terms of customs and values. These places promote inter-community harmony and brotherhood. One female pilgrim narrated to the author,

Sacred centres especially Muslim shrines are working as learning centres. People from different regions like Urban and Rural areas and different cultures come here for pilgrimage practice; this is diffusing cultural traits among diverse communities. The Hazaratbal shrine is working as a socialising agent where pilgrims expect new customs and values.

Buying and Selling of Local Products

The Hazaratbal shrine in the valley of Kashmir promotes local markets and crafts. The Jamu Market (after Friday Prayers) and Urus markets (after annual religious ceremonies) are a huge source of revenue for local dwellers and vendors. Women visitors at Hazaratbal

shrine prefer to buy goods and crafts of different kinds as memorable and sacred gifts. The researcher observed huge lines of female visitors bargaining with shopkeepers and vendors to buy local, national and international products. A senior female pilgrim told the author about the importance and relevance of these products available within the vicinity of Hazaratbal Shrine.

These products are auspicious for us. The sole purpose of buying things at Hazaratbal market is to leave for home with holy memories and sacred gifts as a message to coming generations how important and close is Shrine Culture to us. Moreover, this market is reviving the local art and craft.

Conclusion

The visitation of sacred shrines had existed for many hundreds of years before the phenomenon of tourism appeared in human behaviour (Fleisher, 2000). Hazaratbal Shrine is the largest holy site in Kashmir in terms of attracting people of local, regional, national and international level. Both males and females are allowed to visit and perform rituals at the Shrine. The reason for its popularity at National and International level is the presence of a holy relic (hair of the Prophet Mohammad SAW). The Shrine is also known as Madinat-ul-Sani (second Madina) (Amin, 2013). In fact it is suggested that the grand Masjid of Hazaratbal resembles the structure of Masjid Nabi (Mir, 1983; Pandit, 1997).

People in Kashmir irrespective of caste, colour, creed, gender, age, religion or region exhibit utter devotion towards Hazratbal shrine. The people of Kashmir are spiritually connected with the Shrine. The Holy Relic is deposited in a casket and is displayed on several important occasions every year. The present study tried to explore the female perspective of holy shrine experiences through the prism of the interpretative approach. Hazaratbal Shrine plays a significant role in the socio-cultural setup of Kashmir. Everyday a rush of people, both male and female, travel to shrines with different motivations and expectation. Major sects in Kashmir such as the Deobandis, Bralivies, and Ahlehadee prefer to participate in Urs at Hazaratbal Shrine.

The primary observation in this research is that women in the shrine are offering prayers and worships individually

and collectively. They express their devotion by praying to Allah (God), offering Namaz, Nawafil and touching the icons of the Shrine. Repeated activities were observed by author during his multiple visits to the shrine. The respondents believe that shrines have a supernatural power to provide remedies for worldly challenges. Moreover, female pilgrims visit the shrine to undertake special prayers (Mannat). They have profound faith in Hazaratbal shrine, that it can cure their illness be it physical or psychological. During conversations with the visitors, the author came to know that a shrine provides intervention in their health issues. They shared that worship individually or collectively can help to overcome illness. Apart from the sacred experiences, women visitors to Hazaratbal shrine shared a number of profane motives for their pilgrimage practices which include heritage, learning and the presence of local markets.

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