

Shrines: spiritual elevation or psychological outlet

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This discourse on shrines may be considered as a sequel to this author's article last week-though slightly digressed. The goings on at hallowed places is one issue. But the more subtle question is related to the reasons behind huge congregations comprising pilgrims from all over the country and from across the borders. A simple and perfectly acceptable answer is that the devotees throng these places to pay homage to the *Sahib-i-Mazar* (the saint of the tomb). But that is an umbrella reply. There are the pilgrims who visit the shrines purely for their spiritual enhancement through prayers, rituals and meetings with other devotees. But the vast majority come to seek blessings for the solution of one difficulty or the other. Perhaps as big a number attends these assemblages solely for fun and revelry.

One is not equipped to comment on the intricacies of devotional pilgrims. This is an age-old and well-established tradition that novices or younger religious scholars and *sufis* undertake visits to the *khanqahs* of living saints and spiritual teachers, and places where scholars gather to exchange views and learn from various schools of thought. Every *sufi* saint worth his salt embarked on long travels to enrich himself from old teachings and fresh knowledge through stay in shrines, mosques, *madrassas* — or just attending addresses and sermons of learned saints and savants. This convention still continues, as quietly as in the times of yore. These roving knowledge-seekers are in evidence at large shrines, abodes of spiritual personages, and scholars. The anniversaries of popular saints provide a unique opportunity for followers of divine pursuits to get together and carry out rituals to acquire excellence.

The sight-seers and revelers are hybrid of the disciples of an order and entertainment-starved populace. They attend festivals alone or with families and friends. Depending upon the company, they can confine themselves to simple routine: pray at the tomb and whatever is prescribed, feasting on

as it is near, and is free unless one wants to contribute voluntarily.

Divine help is involved as the last resort — in desperation — in all societies. There are legends about the miracles that take place at various shrines in Europe. There are myths about various places, persons and dates and numbers even in the most advanced countries. The primitive societies worship everything that they cannot comprehend or which threatens their lives and belongings. They beg that they be spared of misfortune and granted security, and blessed with long life and prosperity. Practically every dangerous place in the world has a small shrine around, to pray and solicit safety. There are images of crucified Christ or Lady Maryam on the mountain roads in the Catholic countries. The Buddhist countries have Buddha statues and carvings at similar places. Muslim countries have a grave or a small shrine at such points. I have seen some, emerging during my life-time, starting with a cot, pitcher of water and a few improvised flags. At least two of them seem to be doing roaring business. Sanctioned or not by religion, they have the faith of the people who approach them to redress their afflictions or get at least a ray of hope in a desperate situation.

The older and larger shrines attract much larger crowds at the annual meets. There is also a continuous stream of visitors throughout the year. Most of these assemblies are held so holy

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that the needy look up to them for assuaging their lives, getting rid of their problems and receiving divine blessings for the future. An analysis of the types of requests over time should reflect the change in people's behaviour and aspects of life in which they have given up hope. Historical account of the famous annual urs shows that the original preponderance of religious-minded disciples had given way to fun-loving pilgrims. One has come across a commentary, that towards the end of the Mughal Empire, the huge graveyard in the vicinity of the mazar of Hazrat Bakhtiyar Kaki at Mehroli was frequented by the Mughal revelers along with the paraphernalia for debauchery. The same comment states that this liberty with *Shariah* hastened the downfall of the Mughals!

There are no reliable figures about

sumptuous food traditionally prepared at an anniversary, and while away the time in innocent fun and games. But there is no dearth of hardened playboys who come prepared for even the most depraved acts which are not worthy of an holy occasion. These are carried out at some distance from the mausoleums, but they could include gambling, prostitution, dancing, drugs, drinking — ie, everything prohibited in the *Shariah* (religious law). Ridiculous as it is there are revelers who attribute their gains and losses to the saint whose *Urs* they are attending, as if he approved of these activities.

The overwhelming majority of visitors to *mazars* (tombs) however, comprises pilgrims who come in pursuit of a remedy to their ills and a relief from their misfortune. They are staunch believers in the efficacy of making a request at the mazar according to the rituals specified for the place. They could be innocuous like praying a number of times, fasting, or feeding the poor. But many of them are based on superstitions, mostly bordering on the ridiculous. The tradition might ask a needy person to bathe and drink from a common pond, walk on live cinders, pass through narrow passages, get beaten up by sticks, get lashed, made to swallow ashes and powder it on the body, tied to trees, pillars and gates etc to name a few. Islam has no place for superstitions; they have been copied from pagan traditions. Strict conservative Muslims consider that even begging favours at a mazar was un-Islamic. In spite of these adverse views, the *bidaats* (wrong practices) continue. There is practically no force to stop them or even modify them.

Apart from the power of tradition and the lack of organised reform bodies, the rites at the shrines will continue, since they fill gaps of unfulfilled needs. Their petitions made at the *mazars* are actually a manifestation of the insecurity created by the failure of institutions. The visitors, generally, pray for personal and family problems, physical maladies, mental illness, cases in the courts, lost relatives, infertility etc. With the exception of personal requests like love affairs, marriage discord, for which no institutions exist, all other complaints are against the establishment, meaning that people are dissatisfied with their performance. They have to resort to seek help from the supernatural

There are no female figures about the mix of pilgrims to *mazars* these days. But what one has been able to gather from some regular visitors to *mazars* is the marked increase in the number of the sick and their family members, followed by people who face problems with their superiors, the police or the courts. The overall increase in congregations is explained by the increase in population. But the large number of sick and the deprived point to the growing injustice, oppression and unconcern in society. Crowding and indifference in the hospitals, non-availability of medical care in the remote areas, the high price of drugs and medical care oblige patients to seek celestial intervention.

The corruption, especially in the government departments, callousness and illegal practices by the police, injustice and high-handedness of the influential, and the overall atmosphere of lawlessness have plunged the common people into a state of insecurity. With all doors for redressal closed, people converge at the holy places for support. Their problems may or may not be solved, but the attendance at a shrine does act as a psychological outlet.

Large religious congregations have long been serving as places for trade, and business through various activities typical of community fairs. With the large number of despondent people around, opportunism, quackery and deception become rampant. In addition, hordes of criminals also descend upon the place. The local administration and the Auqaf department try to control things. But it is understandably only partly effective — interference in the 'domain' of a saint is not seen favourably by the devotees. What is needed is a change in the thinking of the traditional caretakers and improve the mode of co-operation between them and the administration. But the real change will come only with improvement in public services and the alleviation of poverty, ignorance and the resolve to cleanse the society.

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