

VISITING HOLY SHRINES;

A SURVEY TO ASSESS THE COMMON REASONS BY DEVOTEES IN KARACHI, PAKISTAN

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Article Citation:

Shaikh ZA, Khatoon F, Husain SS, Ibrahim AM, Abdullah M. Visiting holy shrines; A survey to assess the common reasons by devotees in Karachi-Pakistan. Professional Med J Sep 2010;17(3): 493-497.

ABSTRACT ... Background: There are frequent visits of the devotees to the holy shrines mainly for the purpose of mental healing. The people with various beliefs and religions attribute divine powers to the graves of their saints. This study surveyed the purpose of the visits to shrines, their beneficial effects, and also the sanctity violated by drug addicts and others. **Objectives:** 1) To assess the common reasons of visiting holy shrines. 2) To determine the use / misuse of these visits. **Methodology: Study Design:** Cross-sectional. **Setting:** One most commonly visited shrine in Karachi. **Duration of Study:** 01-06-2008 to 30-07-2008. **Sample size:** 120 visitors. **Inclusion Criteria:** Visitors of 20 years age or older, who consented to participate. **Exclusion Criteria:** Visitors of less than 20 years age and who did not agree to participate. **Results:** Total number of study subjects was 120, with male to female ratio of 58:42. Their age varied from 20 to 80 years. They belonged to various socio-economic and ethnic groups with varying educational level. Majority of the visitors come frequently. The purpose of visits included reward (swab), poverty, domestic problems, infertility, ill health, in addition to see lovers to have an access to commercial sex workers and narcotics. Some devotees had a mishap during the visit. **Conclusion:** Most of the visitors come for mental healing and relaxation with the hope of getting solutions for their problems, and a few use these sacred places for their wrong doings.

Key words: Shrines, Devotees, Visits.

INTRODUCTION

The people from various beliefs and religions attribute supernatural and divine powers to the graves of their saints as they do to the sacred trees, holy springs, etc. This is a common practice among Muslims and the followers of other religions. There are the beliefs concerning the supernatural characteristics and powers of sacred shrines, trees, etc.

The people have faith in miracles. Shrines have their own rituals that their followers perform.

One of these is tying the threads in knots around a tree. The purpose being, to make a wish, 'mannat' from God¹.

In a study that surveyed the ceremonies and customs related to sacred trees in present-day Israel, it was found that the sacred trees were treated as another kind of

Article received on: 05/03/2010
Accepted for Publication: 13/04/2010
Received after proof reading: 04/08/2010

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sacred entity with all their metaphysical as well as physical manifestations. Both the Muslims and Druze attributed supernatural dimensions to sacred trees. The Muslims attribute similar divine powers to sacred trees as they do to the graves of their saints².

The shrines of these great people have all been built for the greater good of humanity and to honour for the great work they have done. But today one can see there druggies, prostitutes, abandoned children, homeless women, and the list goes on. For all these people these shrines seem like a refuge or a place to carry out their illegal operations. These holy places hardly seem to be there for a holy purpose now³.

Thousands of devotees visit the shrines regularly but unfortunately their sanctity is being violated by drug addicts and others. This study surveyed the purpose of the visits of shrines, their beneficial effects, and also the sanctity violated by drug addicts and others.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This is a cross-sectional study by design, and was conducted at one of the most commonly visited shrine in Karachi, Pakistan. Besides those who are permanent residents of Karachi, the people from various parts of Pakistan also visit this shrine.

The information was collected by filling a pre-tested standardized performa. The informed consent was taken from the study participants. The visitors of 20 years age or older, who consented to participate were included in the study; and those of less than 20 years age or who did not agree to participate, were excluded. The data of 120 visitors were collected during the period from 01-06-2008 to 30-07-2008. The results were analyzed by using SPSS-16.00.

RESULTS

Total number of study participants was 120, with male to female ratio of 58:42 (n=70:50). These visitors were from various ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic groups. These people were from 20 to 80 years of age, with majority (37%) of 31-50 years. Among these devotees, 69

(57.5%) were married, 38 (31.7%) single, 7 (5.8%) widow and 6 (5%) divorced / separated. They belonged to various socio-economic and ethnic groups with varying educational level as shown in table I.

The purpose of visits included reward (swab), poverty, domestic problems, infertility, ill health, in addition to see lovers, to have access to commercial sex workers and narcotics. The purpose of visit as compared with sex of study subjects is shown in table II.

As for the number of visits is concerned, majority of the visitors i.e. 76 (63.3%) were coming frequently, 7 (5.8%) had paid first visit and 37 (30.8%) persons had come 2-5 times. All the first time visitors were males and they wanted to come again to the shrine.

Total 25 (20.8%) of the visitors i.e. 19 (38%) males and 6 (8.6%) females, were smokers; whereas 15 (12.5%) i.e. 10 (20%) males and 5 (7.1%) females had a history of taking drugs.

Thirteen (10.8%) devotees had a mishap during the visit. The type of mishap and sex of the visitors is shown in table-III.

DISCUSSION

Most of the visitors come for mental healing and relaxation with the and in hope of solution for their problems, and a few use these sacred places for their wrong doings. The sale of narcotics seems to be a routine business at these sacred places.

In a meeting of Hyderabad (Sindh) District Council, a committee was formed to compile a report regarding sale of narcotics at shrines in Hyderabad district. A resolution pointed that thousands of devotees visit these shrines regularly but unfortunately their sanctity was being violated by drug addicts. It is quite painful for visitors that sale of narcotics was going on at the resting places of saints. According to the report, situation was almost the same at all the shrines across the country⁴.

Table-I. Occupation, educational level and income of the study participants					
Occupation	Frequency	Education	Frequency	Income/Month	Frequency
Government Job	10 (8.3%)	Uneducated	23 (19.2%)	Up to 5000	29 (24.2%)
Private Job	16 (13.3%)	Can Read	23 (19.2%)	6000 - 10000	21 (17.5%)
Retired	6 (5.0%)	Matric	28 (23.3%)	11000 - 20000	2 (1.7%)
Private Business	12 (10.0%)	Graduate	13 (10.8%)	21000 - 40000	1 (0.8%)
Professional	3 (2.5%)	Postgraduate	15 (12.5%)	>40000	1 (0.8%)
Jobless	16 (13.3%)	Professional	7 (5.8%)	Dependent	63 (52.5%)
House Wives	47 (39.2%)	Others	11 (9.2%)	Not Disclosed	3 (2.5%)
Students	5 (4.2%)	Total	120 (100%)	Total	120 (100%)
Others	5 (4.2%)				
Total	120 (100%)				

Table-II. Purpose of visit as compared with sex of study subjects			
Purpose of visit	Sex of study participants		
	Male	Female	Total
Reward (Swab)	3 (6.0%)	3 (4.3%)	6 (5.0%)
Poverty	4 (8.0%)	4 (5.7%)	8 (6.7%)
Domestic Problems	2 (4.0%)	6 (8.6%)	8 (6.7%)
Financial / Business Problems	3 (6.0%)	1 (1.4%)	4 (3.3%)
Infertility	1 (2.0%)	11 (15.7%)	12 (10.0%)
Ill Health	3 (6.0%)	14 (20.0%)	17 (14.2%)
Unemployment	11 (22.0%)	4 (5.7%)	15 (12.5%)
Taken by parents	0 (0.0%)	3 (4.3%)	3 (2.5%)
Business deal	3 (6.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (3.3%)
To have access to commercial sex workers	4 (8.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (3.3%)
Access to narcotics	3 (6.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (2.5%)
To get rid of Jinn/Bhoot/Saya	0 (0.0%)	4 (5.7%)	4 (3.3%)
To see lover	3 (6.0%)	4 (5.7%)	7 (5.8%)
Marriage	1 (2.0%)	6 (8.6%)	7 (5.8%)
Mix	9 (18.0%)	10 (14.3%)	19 (15.8%)
Total	50 (100%)	70 (100%)	120 (100%)

Table-III. Sex of study subjects and type of mishap during visit

Sex of study participant	Type of mishap during visit			
	Nil	Deprived of money	Deceived bu So-called reprehensive of the shrine	Total
Male	45 (90.0%)	5 (10.0%)	0 (0.0%)	50 (100%)
Female	62 (88.6%)	5 (7.1%)	3 (4.3%)	70 (100%)
Total	107 (89.2%)	10 (8.3%)	3 (2.5%)	120 (100%)

The officials of the Auqaf Department expelled famous drum player Pappu Saeen from the Baba Shah Jamal Shrine in Lahore, after a notable increase in the consumption of drugs in the surrounding area. They urged the concerned police officials and the union council representatives to take action against those involved in the business of drugs in the area. Residents reported a large number of drug addicts visited the area to listen to Pappu Saeen's drum tunes and openly consumed drugs. They alleged the shrine had become a safe haven for drug addicts⁵.

The drug addicts are very frequently found at the sacred places. According to Rana Asif Habib, President of Initiator Human Development Foundation, two million youth in Karachi are drug addicts.

The drug addicts are facilitated by those places where Langars (free food) are given, he said. The addicts get free food to eat and a selling point of their drugs at these places. The Restoril and Valium drugs are also used to loot the people on Mazars, bus stops, railway stations and other such places where children give these drugs to people through different means and once the people get unconscious they are looted by the Mafia dealing with the drugs⁶.

According to a visitor's report, nothing was being done to eradicate these evils from darbars. Some measures undertaken by the relevant authorities to curb the deadly issues include a drug rehabilitation centre inside the vicinity of the Data Darbar⁷.

Surprisingly some visitors came for business deal. There

are certain negative aspects at shrines, the illegalities that go on there everyday; the children, the runaways, the prostitutes and the druggies. Building up these mausoleums seems to have acted as an evil in the society that has succeeded in rising up more evils⁸. Some of the study subjects complained of being deprived of their money; a few women were also deceived there. The number of those deceived earlier could be high, as they might not have come again to visit the shrine. The sanctity of these places is also violated by the presence of commercial sex workers. One story of same kind was told by a visitor. According to him, "I'm sure my story would be hilarious for most of my readers but it has some serious complications to it as well. I am or I was an inexperienced visitor to these Darbars and now I realise that this is hardly a safe place for one to visit with family and children. It's hard to believe, these shrines are meant for something else and what goes on in their name is a completely different story¹⁰. It has become more of a sanctuary for them. These holy places hardly seem to be there for a holy purpose now¹¹. In another same type of incident, the devotees from Rahim Yar Khan quoted a story where they saw a woman who came to Data Darbar from her house as she had a fight with her husband. Later in the morning nobody knew where she went nor even the officials⁹.

The people also used to come for the treatment of mental disorders and 'jinn / saya'. The same is also found in neighbouring countries. There was a shocking treatment of mentally disabled people in India, when 27 patients were burnt alive in a private mental asylum in Erwadi village, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The deceased included 11 women who had been chained to

rocks and pillars. Locals said they thought nothing of the patients' screams for help because they shouted and screamed everyday. The asylum was linked to a holy shrine or "dargah" and it was believed that the soil of the village had healing power¹². Same kind of shrines / dargah for the people with mental disorders and/or 'jinn / saya' may be frequently found in our country also.

CONCLUSION

Most of the visitors come for mental healing and relaxation with the hope of solutions for their problems, and a few use these sacred places for their wrong doings. People should be educated and informed for real spirit and soul of the visits of shrines; and not to go there for impossible happenings or miracles. They must have realistic approach and maintain sanctity of these places. The devotees may get mental relaxation and sense of satisfaction. They should be careful there so as not to be deceived by criminal minded persons. The authority should be vigilant and keep an eye on these criminals.

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