

## RELIGION WITH LENS OF MYSTICISM AMID INHABITANTS OF DESERT: A STUDY OF CHOLISTAN

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### Abstract

This current paper aims at exploring mysticism in the Cholistan desert which has dominantly semi-nomadic culture. It also attempts to explore how mystic practices are helpful for people of Cholistan for coping with their day-to-day problems. This qualitative study adopted ethnographic method and interviewed 50 participants from Cholistan through protracted qualitative interview and participants observation. The data were analyzed through content analysis technique. The findings revealed that people of Cholistan are more tilted towards devotional practices of Islam than its orthodox version. Furthermore, people in Cholistan have strong belief in spiritual power of the sufis and visit shrines for solution of their social, economic, physical, psychological and spiritual problems. Since there are no formal ways (mosque and madarassah) of getting religious education about beliefs and practices; that is why nearly all people were following devotional practices mainly introduced by two popular sufi saints of Cholistan namely Khawaja Ghulam Farid and Chanan Pir. The study concludes that due to poor access to basic amenities of life such as food, health, housing, education, drinking water and power supply in the Cholistan, sufism and spirituality is serving as a strong psychological support for the helpless and severely deprived people of Cholistan other than satisfying their religious sentiments.

**Keywords:** Mysticism, spirituality, religion, shrine, Cholistan.

### Introduction

There is interrelationship and interconnectedness between religion, local culture and environment, that is why there are different practices of same religion in the different regions. As harmony and diversity, both are covered by religion's societal nature. This is the reason of studying their religious institution, rites and doctrinal declarations to get acquaintance with religion of people<sup>(1)</sup>. Based on concept of interrelationship between religious practices and environment, this paper attempts to explore religion with the lens of mysticism in the Cholistan. Cholistan, locally known as *Rohi*, was once hub of Hakra valley civilization and trade mark of cultivation, but by 600 BC, certain climatic changes transformed it into a desert<sup>(2)</sup>. Cholistan is part of former princely state of Bahawalpur which came under rule of Daudpotra Abbasis in earliest of 18th century<sup>(3)</sup>. Total area of Cholistan is 26100km<sup>2</sup> which is mostly characterized by mass sand dunes, however almost 2,800 km area is irrigated through canal water<sup>(4)</sup>. Based on topography, Cholistan is divided into two parts; Greater Cholistan and Lesser Cholistan. Lesser Cholistan has saline alluvial soil with plain grounds and covers an area of 7,770 km<sup>2</sup> whereas Greater Cholistan mostly consists of sand dunes heighten from 20-120 feet locally called *tibba*<sup>(5)</sup>. Cholistan is situated at 112 meters above the sea level and falls in the sub-tropical area with high temperature in the summer fluctuating between 28.33°C to 38.5°C, while in winter it falls down to 3°C to 27°C and 100-200 mm average annual rainfall<sup>(6,7, 8 & 9)</sup>. Being a desert area, major source of water in Cholistan is rainfall because underground water is saline in most of the areas<sup>(8)</sup>. For ensuring water for drinking and other daily usage, local people store in a mud made pound locally called as *toba*<sup>(10)</sup>. Cholistan is water scarce area for which there are various factors such as high temperature

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and hot climate, low precipitation, absence of rivers and lower level of water from earth surface<sup>(9, &11)</sup>. Due to these climatic and environmental conditions, life of human being and livestock revolves around search of water. When there is scarcity of drinking water during in the summer season (starting from March-April), local people migrate to next destination within or out of Cholistan along with their herds for the sake of water. They return to their *toba* in Lesser or Greater Cholistan upon seasonal rainfall usually during July-August<sup>(12)</sup>. The paper is divided into four sections. After giving introduction of Cholistan and Sufism, section two focusses on existence of sufi shrines and *pirs* in Cholistan. Section three is based on two most popular sufi saints of Cholistan; Khawaja Ghulam Farid and Chanan Pir. Discussion and conclusion are presented in section four.

### Description and meaning of sufism

From very beginning, by nature human beings are curious and inquisitive about existence of Creator and reality of life<sup>(13)</sup>. Islamic mysticism, which is also known as sufism, aims at self-purification and actualization of the reality of life and universe in the broader perspectives. The concept of mysticism is found in almost all divine religion of the world in one or other form. Mysticism movement started for preaching and promotion of knowledge of the reality of this world. In the context of sub-continent, it well documented that sufis has undeniable role in spreading Islam in the region, these sufis presented softer aspect of Islam and not only preached but also themselves demonstrated love and tolerance for everyone without any discrimination<sup>(14)</sup>.

In the different regions, there are different terms for sufis such as *wali*, it is Arabic term and is used for a saint. *Wali* is person who is near to Allah or a friend of Him. Similarly, in Middle East, the title *shaikh* is given to the saint, *pir* (spiritual guide) in south Asia, *dede* in Turkey, *ishan* in central Asia, *murabit* in north Africa and *agurram*, in the language of Berbers<sup>(15)</sup>.

Historically, concept of sufism denotes 'pathway to Creator as it is believed the sufis help the devotees for purifying their lives through changing patterns and removing all the barriers between them and Allah<sup>(16)</sup>. Most of the people in Pakistan believe that mystical personalities possess miraculous powers and are embodiment of virtues who can purify their devotees<sup>(17)</sup>.

In other words, it can be stated sufism is that shade of Islam which emphasizes inner self activities rather than rituals to perform. The popular term used for this approach of Islam is also known as *Tasawwuf*. There are different narratives about origin of the sufism, some scholars associate the word 'sufi' with Arabic word 'safe' meaning purity or with *Ashabus-safa* which is used for a group of people who were special followers of Holy Prophet (ﷺ). This word is also linked with '*suf*' meaning wool which was mostly worn by ascetic. Emergence of sufism is attributed to Prophet (ﷺ) himself. As he had revelation of Quran for all making and another revelation within heart for chosen one. So, fore runners of sufism can be thought among companions of holy Prophet (ﷺ). Before advent of Islam, sufism meant renunciation of pleasures of material world, so they were poverty stricken<sup>(18)</sup>. Islamic mysticism is defined as sufism which is actually a way to come in direct personal contact with Allah. Sufism consists of many elements of mystical approach, the social reach that it acquired over centuries of expansion rendered it much more than the path of an esoteric elite. Sufism is comprised of the religious way of both, popular Muslim masses and the smaller number of elevated mystics<sup>(19)</sup>.

Sufism aims at purification of the self. In sufism, self-purification is subject to *ihsan* (seeing Allah by heart and believing that he is seen by Him). This level of satisfaction and purification can be achieved by certain characteristics like fear of Allah, repentance, sincerity, abstinence, truthfulness and thanksgiving<sup>(20)</sup>.

*Murids* (devotees) having different socio-economic, ethnic and linguistic identities are less concerned with institutionalized teachings and accordingly practices of Islam, rather they follow devotional practices of their *morshid* (spiritual guide). The devotees have direct contact with their *pir* who listen to their problems, in sufism, *pir* has the authority and is trusted to intervene in social and spiritual life of his devotees. It is also believed that a Sufi who has died a long time ago, has still the power for mediating between Creator and human being through his everlasting spiritual power<sup>(21)</sup>.

### Research Methodology

Adopting ethnographic research method, current study collected data from 50 elderly participants. The participants were selected by using purposive sampling from both Lesser and Greater Cholistan. Protracted qualitative interview and participant's observation was used for data collection. The data were analyzed through content analysis technique. Secondary data was collected from online sources, books and reports of local and international organizations.

### Shrines in Cholistan

In the subcontinent, shrine of a sufi is given different name such as *dargah* (literally, a royal court), *mazar*, *ziyarat gah* (places of visit or pilgrimage), or *khanqah* (a sufi lodge)<sup>(22)</sup>. *Dargah* is a sacred place where there are many devotional activities by the devotees<sup>(23)</sup>. There exists a deep respect and devotion for the mystic personalities on the part of people in Cholistan, this practice has given space to mysticism in the life of common people. In sufism, an important concept is *khanqah* which is used for sufi lodges. The center of the *pir* based mediational is shrine. People use different words for shrines such as *Zyarat*, *Khanqah*, *Darbar* and *Dargah*. *Sajadda Nashin* of shrine is thought as shadow of Allah<sup>(24)</sup>.

In the Cholistan, every clan follow a *pir* which is mostly not the same being followed by neighboring clans. They devotees in Cholistan believe *pir* having closeness with Allah and having spiritual power, through which *pir* can make something happen through their purity and piousness. That is why, devotional practices dominate in the area and mystic version is popular. The very fact is that mysticism in the Cholistan is due to two great mystic personalities Khawaja Ghulam Farid and Channan Pir, who spent their lives in the desert and preached people about peacefulness, tolerance and brotherhood. One of study participants narrated in it in these words:

We feel absolute peace of mind while visiting shrines. When one visits such places, there is entirely different feelings, and one feels a unique attraction and inner calmness. After visiting shrine, I feel stronger and encouraged to face what ever worries are surrounding.

### Mystical Personalities in Cholistan

People in Cholistan have deep affiliation and devotion with personalities than system and institutions. Examples for such mystical personalities includes *Dola Sayen* (a title used for kind hearted last ruler of Bahawalpur state Sadiq Muhammad Khan Abbasi) *Mosa Lakh Pal*

(soft-hearted robber), *Chansre Tanwari* (fearless against supernatural), *Hazrat Phelwan Shaheed* (brave fighter), *Jia Bhadar* and *Gaman Bibi* (two brave characters). There are many popular religious personalities in this list like Bakhat Faqeer (a sufi poet) but most prominent mystic and loved personalities of Cholistan are Chanan Pir and Khawaja Ghulam Farid<sup>(25)</sup>. The next section discusses background and role of both mystic personalities in the preaching and practicing mysticism in the Cholistan.

### 1. Khawaja Gulam Farid

Khawaja Ghulam Farid is very popular in Cholistan and Saraiki region due to his sufi poetry which contains expressions of dance, songs and narrations having rooted in culture of this region<sup>(26)</sup>. Khawaja Ghulam Farid was son of Khawajah Khuda Bakhsh. His historical name was Khurshid Alam. On upper side, his pedigree table connects to the second caliph of Islam Hazrat Umar Farooq (R.A)<sup>(27)</sup>. Khawaja Ghulam Farid believed that existence of human being is beyond any limitations. He expressed in sufi thoughts through poetry and preaching to the people. He had special affiliation with *Rohi* that is why people express that Cholistan is a sacred palace especially the Greater Cholistan due to spending time during life and now his shrine in Kot Mithhan. Popularity of Khawaja Ghulam Farid can be judged from the very expression of the people in Cholistan “*Rohi Khawaja Ghulam Farid di aey*” (Cholistan belongs to Khawaja Ghulam Farid). People especially those from Cholistan term *Rohi* with piety, free from worldly evils and bears special blessings of Allah. It is believed that due to presence of shrine of Khawaja Ghulam Farid, there is divine blessings and that is why there is never scarcity of food in the *Rohi*. Cholistanis believe that *Rohi* is peaceful and protected due to Khawaja Ghulam Farid. This belief gives strength and courage to the local people for planning their travelling in the desert area without having material resources at their disposal. One of the study participants explained it in as follows:

Rohi belongs to Khawaja Gulam Farid and he may be felt around whenever one remembers in the Cholistan area. For an outsider, Rohi is fearful and full of dangers but when we intend to travel from one place to another, we just remember him (Khawaja Ghulam Farid) and he remains with us throughout the journey. We never feel frightened.

Khawaja Gulam Farid born in 1261 on Tuesday at Chachran Sahrif on 26th of *Ziqad* or any date of *Zilhaj* or *Muharam*, *Ramadan-ul-Mubarak*. At the age of 8 years, his father died whereas his mother died before this. At same age, he learnt holy Quran by heart. He was brought up by his brother Maulana Ghulam Fakhruddin, and took oath on his hand at age of 13, who himself was a scholar and sufi of high rank. Khawaja Ghulam Farid learnt many contemporary languages like Persian, Sindhi, Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and Marwari. He developed mastery in research and religious teachings like Hadith, *Tafsir*, *Fiqh*. At age of 27, he became *Sajjadah Nashin* after his elder brother. “For Khawaja Ghulam Farid this polarity ‘is ultimately transcended by virtue of the Self, the intellect or the spirit which is identical with the Divine Essence’<sup>(28)</sup>. In his view, human existence is beyond any limitations and universal. He believed in pantheism which is against dividing society on sectarian grounds and difference in beliefs. This makes sufi a messenger of peace, love and harmony and he tries to bring human beings close to each other, so is poetry of Khawaja Ghulam Farid who preached love and peace among his devotees and

masses. He was against oppressing of weak and want easiness for them. He was in favour of kindness and care to them and take great care without any discrimination of colour, caste or religion <sup>(29)</sup>. One of the participants substantiated it in the following words:

Khawaja Ghulam Farid was messenger of peace and harmony like all sufis of Indo-Pak region. His teaching as well practice was negation of discrimination among human being regardless of caste, colour and creed. He was simple and straightforward in his life and dealings and same were preached by him.

Language of Cholistan is Saraiki which has six dialects <sup>(30)</sup>. Khawaja Ghulam Farid transferred his mystic thoughts through his poetry in Saraiki language. There is always a strong relation between sufi masters and literature such as Rumi's poems in Persian and Ibn `Arabi writings in Arabic. Same is with the literature of modern languages like Malay, Turkish, Wolof and Swahili. Sufi poetry mostly has rich musical heritage which is often being sung <sup>(31)</sup>. Khawaja Ghulam Farid chose the mode of poetry to convey his mystical thoughts to people. Even today, devotees memories his poetry and refer it in daily life and sing on occasional gatherings. The people in Cholistan have great faith in Khawaja Ghulam Farid and they pay visit to his shrine for seeking blessings and enlightenment of the soul. His poetry is source of wisdom and preaching Sufism, that is why it is his devotees memories it and give its reference in their daily life.

## 2. Chanan Pir

The shrine of Chanan Pir is located 65 kilo meters in the south of district Bahawalpur and is situated in the mid of the desert. Chanan Pir is also known with other names such as Chanar Pir, Ammad-ul-Din, Wasal Pir, Rayya Raja Sindhu, Ameer Muhammad and Thekri Pir and Raja Sanjal <sup>(32)</sup>. There are different stories about his birth with little contradictions. Some people narrate that his father's name was Ray Sandhila or Raja Sandheran. It is said that he was born after the prediction of very popular sufi saint Hazrat Shair Shah Syed Jalal ul din. Once he was passing through the desert, he inquired from his disciples that is there any Muslim living in the Cholistan area, the reply was negative. Then he was told that wife of the Raja was pregnant, he prayed and predicted that the baby born will be a boy and Sufi by birth. According to the second version of the story, Sayyed Jalal paid a visit to Derawar Fort (in Cholistan) and invited Raja and his followers towards true teachings of Islam and also predicted that a son will born to Raja who will be saint by birth and same happened. The Raja was told by *Barhmans* that there will born a boy in your state who will change the faith of entire state, so he ordered for abortification of all the expecting women in the state to avoid birth of any male baby, when mother of Chanan Pir came to know it, she asked her husband to leave the place, but one way or the other way Raja learnt about the birth of male baby. Chanan Pir born in a Hindu family and right at the time of birth, he was reciting from the holy Quran, so his Hindu Raja got furious and asked to kill the child immediately or to throw in desert. Innocence of the child inflicted softness and sympathy in the hearts of slaves of the Raja and they throw him under a bush with little hope that someone will adopt him and he would survive. Miraculously, that child was picked and adopted by an issueless Muslim family and they brought him up according to Islamic traditions. Some people narrate that Chanan Pir survived in desert without

any human care, that is why people in Cholistan believe that *ziyarat* (visit to a sacred place) of his tomb would protect children. Chanan Pir never married, however he had seven brothers whose descendants are called Channars and are found in Bahawalpur<sup>(33)</sup>. A study participant expressed his views as follows:

Chanan pir is source of enlightenment in aloofness of Rohi, he spent his whole life in this area and left a message for inhabitants of Cholistan that it is peaceful place for everyone. We believe that Rohi re-sounds and we are not alone anywhere. There is blessing of Chanan Pir in the width and length of Cholistan wherever one goes.

Chanan Pir is also known as *Thekri Pier* because reportedly he used to give *thekri* (small clay piece) to the children that turned into gold, that is why he was very popular among children. He proved to be a great preacher and messenger of Islam in this deserted valley. Many people embraced Islam after getting impressed from his character and his teachings. When this news reached to the Raja of the state, he sent army and the whole village was ruined and people were martyred including Chanan Pir. But in his legacy, he left thousands of followers in the whole region; that is why he became popular in the whole of desert and Saraiki region and this popularity continues till today. One of his devotees expressed his devotion in these words;

Chanan Pir has special place in our hearts. We remember him in every difficult time, and he certainly takes care of us, no matter wherever we are. His name is source of divine blessing, and one would not pass through any trouble

Annual celebrations on shrine of Chanan Pir are believed as symbol and reflection of devotional practices by the people of Cholistan. *Urs/Mela* of Chanan Pir is one of the most popular celebrations in the Cholistan area. The *Urs* is attended by thousands of people from all parts of desert. The celebrations start during the months February and March on every Thursday. Rituals performed at the event undeniably have theme of ancient pre- Muslim existence. As the folklore related with its celebrations have association with music, songs, prayers, salt tasting, applying oil on face and hands from *diaya* (oil lamps) as source of blessing and keeping the bad things away. Such traditions also have adopted by Muslims as well Hindu devotees of the Chanan Pir, who visit the shrine to express their devotion every year. By this, devotion with Chanan Pir has been transferred to the new generation<sup>(34)</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, Chanan Pir as a baby survived without any ostensible human protection and care; so with reference, his devotees believe and pray for having baby boy and/or survival of their existing children. If a couple has baby boy, father comes in *Ghagra and Choli* (female dress) and performs dance at the shrine, gives charity, stays for few days and then returns to home<sup>(35)</sup>. During the *Urs*, both males and females also do local dance called *Jhomar* as an expression of their deep devotion with Chanan Pir<sup>(36)</sup>.

Quoting Suzzane Fisher Staple, a foreign visitor who attended *Urs* of Chanan Pir:

Staunch faith or frayed sanity, the tradition is deep rooted and trusted. Festive celebrations rock the desert. People rejoice in free spirit and for a brief interval, forget miseries that shatter their desolate lives and environment surrounding them. Chanan Pir allures the hopes and aspirations of the people of Cholistan<sup>(37)</sup>. (p. 5)

People in Cholistan have deep affiliation with Chanan Pir. As mentioned before, his shrine is located in the deep desert, that is why local people derive social and psychological support from paying visit there and making vows for their longings. Visitors of the shrine are both males and females and belong to all age groups including children, adults, young and elderly. They have firm belief in spiritual power of Chanan Pir and believe that they can connect themselves with Allah through him.

### **Discussion**

This study aimed at exploring existence of mysticism in the Cholistan desert. Mysticism in Cholistan has made local people contended and helped them in satisfying themselves when they are otherwise helpless to take any measure for addressing their deprivations and difficulties. For example, when they have health problems and are unable to do medical treatment, they satisfy themselves in this way; '*Rohi wich Allah elaj krenda aey*' (Allah Himself treats the sick ones).

In the Cholistan, presence of mystic personalities is source of spreading popular devotional practices of Islam, that is why local people express their deep affection and love for Sufis who inspired and enlightened hearts and souls of local people. In the Pakistan, where state, in most of the cases, has failed to provide care and protection to its citizen, Shrines of the Sufi saints are one of the alternative sources for provision of social, economic and psychological support and guidance for coping with challenges faced by individuals, families and communities<sup>(38)</sup>. Taking this point in case of Cholistan, both the shrines of Khawaja Ghulam Farid and Chanan Pir are also serving as source of social and psychological support for the individuals and families who have no other ways out. Making vow on the shrine gives the devotees a hope for fulfillment of their longings. By this way, they cope with sheer deprivations and seek contentment which helps in smooth continuation of life. Visiting shrine gives them mental relief from pressing needs and problems.

One of the major motivational factors for connecting people of Cholistan to a *pir* is fulfillment of their unmet material and social needs. Major among these include wish for having children especially male, getting relief from physical problems like disability and disease. In addition, *Pir* has strong role in social life of their devotees as he can influence decision making. *Pir* also seek material gains from devotees both in cash and kind, for example, when a *pir* visits devotees, he demands money and animals rather than doing his actual job; soul purification and spiritual training of the devotees.

Muslims in one way or other way want to have a sound connection with Allah. Prerequisite of which is soul purification and closeness with Him. In this search, they follow the chosen people (Sufis) who have gained soul purification actualization of life. Inhabitants of Cholistan are living in the life-threatening environment and keep shifting from one place to another one in search of water and fodder. Under these environmental conditions, the easy and practical way for satisfaction of religious feelings is occasional visit to sufi shrines and *pir*. That is why local people are following traditions of mystic personalities located in their surroundings; Khawaja Ghulam Farid and Chanan Pir as way for finding meanings to their life.

In Pakistan, sufi shrines have central importance in religious and social arena. There are many functions being performed by these Sufi shrines such bringing social harmony, creating avenue for social participation, recreation in the form of qawwali, and devotional dance (*Jhumar* and

*Dhamaal*), imparting religious education to the devotees particularly and visitors in general and last but not least distribution of free food especially rice and sweets<sup>(39 & 40)</sup>.

People in Cholistan visit shrines to make and fulfill vows or attending *Urs* for seeking blessing and soul purification but there is also another perspective; entertainment and recreation through various activities during *Urs* and annual celebrations. By this way, people in Cholistan combine mysticism with cultural practices and celebrations such as singing songs and playing cultural games.

However, some religious schools of thought do not accept sufi version of Islam. The opinion of many Muslims is ambivalent about Sufi beliefs and practices. This school of thought rejects saint-worship, celebration of their days and visit to their shrines for seeking help; that is why this school of thought terms devotional practices as sinful deeds<sup>(41 & 42)</sup>. But in the case of Cholistan, local people have strong and unshakeable devotion for and affiliation with their shrines and their living *pirs*. They have firm belief that *pirs* and shrines of sufis are center of spirituality and sufism and their way leads to Allah.

### Conclusion

Keeping in the view hostile environmental conditions of Cholistan, where life mostly revolves around search of water, food and fodder and where inhabitants struggle for survival and findings basic necessities of life, there are less and least chances of performance of regular and congregational prayers by Muslims. Occasional visit of *pir* and annual visit to shrines of sufi saints like Khawaja Ghulam Farid and Chanan Pir are thought to be adequate for fulfillment of religious feelings. Following and carrying out devotional practices of Islam are easy for the people in Cholistan in the wake of tough conditions under which they spend their life. Presence of mystic personalities in the area is major source of psychological support for the people as they can share their very personal matters with the Pir and become satisfied and contented with what so ever solution *pir* suggests to them. By this way, they are tolerant to difficulties surroundings them and are resilient after facing social, economic and psychological shocks.

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