

Preface

The woman was wrapped in multiple shawls and it was impossible to see her face. They threw her on the floor where she started thrashing and moving in circles around the grave of the saint. She screamed violently and begged for forgiveness while her family members loudly chanted “Dam a dam mast qalandar.” The woman continued to move on the floor and at one point, her head landed near my feet and I caught a glimpse of her face. There was a trail of black and blue bruises around her cheeks, neck and shoulders. She had clearly been beaten up badly. The women in the crowd murmured that she had been possessed by a *jinn*¹ and that her family had brought her to the shrine to get rid of it.

I grew up in Pakistan listening to stories of atrocities that happen in shrines. From cases of domestic violence to sexual assault, shrines are described as places that women should steer clear of. However, I could never understand why the *Urs* of certain saints was declared a national holiday. One thing was clear from the beginning- Sufi shrines play a key role in the lifestyle of Pakistanis regardless of whether they believe in sainthood or not.

It is this very role of shrines that makes them controversial: a mere building that has seen so many regimes come and go and yet is still a prominent feature of its community. Another reason as to why shrines are controversial are the fights for role of the pir. And then there are talks about politicisation of shrines. A popular belief is that shrines exist for the entertainment and exploitation of illiterate masses and the pir enjoys control over them. If literacy rates in Pakistan were to rise, then surely people will stand up to the pir and revolt against him.

Before I visited shrines for research, I had a similar trajectory of thought. However, when I spent

1 Supernatural creatures in Islamic theology that are at a lower rank than angels and can appear in human and animal form.

days and nights at different shrines, I changed my mind because what I saw appalled me. I saw feudal lords give up wealth and prestige to become *faqirs* and I saw highly educated intellectuals call themselves 'dogs at the threshold of the shrine.' I had never seen such a strong sense of devotion before and it is impossible to describe this almost fanatical love for the saint, his work and his legacy. This also helps to explain the admiration and support that the pir gets from these devotees as they are direct descendants of the saint and therefore, deserve respect.

This strong sense of devotion also opens doors for exploitation and as I argue in this thesis, politicisation. The cyclical chain of control cannot be determined as devotees believe in the saint and the pir, most pirs argue that the government should hand over complete control of shrines to them while the government protests that the pir doesn't take good care of shrines. At some points, it is hard to determine what is being politicised, how it can be stopped or if it even needs to be stopped.

It is not possible to come to a rational conclusion regarding the politicisation of shrines without considering several factors. Firstly, it is important to understand the complicated relationship between religion and politics in Pakistan and how it has changed between numerous regimes. Secondly, the fervor associated with shrines needs to be unpacked more- is it just a by product of the broader exploitation of religion? Lastly, it is crucial to know the opinions of the major stakeholders regarding the role of Sufi shrines in the future.

This thesis-novel attempts to look at all of these three factors and aims to link them to themes of terrorism and protection of shrines. More importantly, it seeks to capture the mystical and almost story-like aspect of the shrine. Inspired by *Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak, this senior work is divided into four major sections namely Water, Wind, Earth and The Void. Each section sheds light on a different aspect of the shrine culture and its politicisation and a variety of research material has been used in each section.

The section named Water analyses the extensive amount of literature that has been written on themes of political Islam, history of Sufism and the politicisation of the role of the pir and of Sufi shrines in Pakistan. Like religion, Sufism has been interpreted in different ways and Sufi shrines have served numerous purposes ranging from political spheres to becoming targets for terrorism. This section looks at history in order to discover certain trends that might help in explaining the present state of Sufi shrines in Pakistan.

The sections of Wind and Earth are based on case studies of the shrines of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan and of Bulleh Shah in Lahore. I visited the shrines in December 2017 and January 2018 and lived in the vicinity of both shrines. I was able to conduct detailed interviews with numerous people regarding their belief and devotion to the saint, the pir and the shrine itself. This section sheds light on the shrine culture and how it varies from shrine to shrine. It also subtly highlights the ways in which shrines are politicised and how people play a role in this without realising it. The sections are written in a narrative format following that of the novel *Forty Rules of Love* with five people from each shrine telling their own story.

The final section aptly called *The Void* focuses solely on the politicisation of shrines, an evasive concept that is present yet out of reach. I distributed questionnaires at the shrines of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, Bulleh Shah, Sachal Sarmast and at the Shah Abdul Latif Bhatta University in Khairpur. The section explores trends and conclusions derived from the answers of respondents. It seeks depth into how people who visit shrines for religious purposes perceive terrorists and the pir as opposed to those who visit shrines for non-religious purposes. This section also highlights the impact of education on how people view shrines and what it means to grow up and/or go to university in an area that has a famous Sufi shrine.

One of my primary takeaways from this research was the fact that Sufi shrines have existed and

will continue to exist in Pakistan and elsewhere. This is because they will continue to have ardent devotees who are willing to sacrifice their lives for the pir and the shrine. As for the politicisation of shrines, it can either be positive and negative. If the government works closely with the sajjada nasheen in developing shrines as centres for education, peace and equality, then the politicisation of shrines can have a positive impact. However, if politicians work with the pir alone for the exploitation of illiterate masses or if the possession of shrines continues to a point of contention between the government and the sajjada nasheen, then politicisation of shrines can be potentially harmful.

With elections looming closer in Pakistan, shrines are emerging in the spotlight more strongly than ever before as politicians visit shrines in order to convince people to vote for them. One can only speculate who will win and whether there will be any change in the politics of shrines. Only time will tell.

