



RESEARCH PAPER

The Role of Pirs and Shrines in the Politics of Pakistan: A case study of District Toba Tek Singh

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ABSTRACT

This research studied the factors that tend to influence the engagement of the Pir and shrines during and after the election process. Most Muslims in Toba Tek Singh identify as Pirs and Shrines have had a considerable effect on the region's religious landscape; neither their patronage nor their patrons' loyalty to them has served as a reliable foundation for overt political activity in the area. Shrines and Pirs were closely related to politics in the 21st century. The Shrines and Pirs gave rise to a humanist approach to politics observed in Toba Tek Singh, and through such traditions, local authorities get benefitted politically and economically. The qualitative research methodology is opted in this research by collecting empirical data to produce more relevant findings on a thorough study of electors. This research found out that most individuals strongly believe in the advantages of shrines with their Pirs and routinely visit them to fulfil their sociological, economic, psychological, and spiritual needs. This study insights that, the shrine phenomenon should be further studied at both the macro and micro levels to understand what political dynamics are fostering or enhancing the circumstance of shrine politics to make it less prevalent as it is crucial in affecting voter behavior in elections.

KEYWORDS

Elections, Pirs, Politics, Shrines, Toba Tek Singh

Introduction

From the beginning of the first Islamic empire, the dominance of spiritual leaders has existed. Some of the great thinkers asserted that spiritual order exists quietly separated from political order. The belief and validity of the existence of the spiritual kingdom were directly followed by its application even in this age of modernization. In the pre-Mughal era, it was believed that the kings or Sultan of India had the blessings of spiritual leaders. The followers of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi used to call him the Qayyum (A permanent pole) who controlled the universe. Two principles can be found from that era, 1: the saints claimed unchallenged authority, and people acknowledged that ace by following them; 2: the saints and the kings pulled together. They need one another; the king needs the saint to strengthen his legitimacy; the saint needs a king to get some official patronage and land for the Khanqah and the grants for the shrine as they also wanted to increase their dominance over the people. (Aziz, 2001)

The pirs hold an unchallenged position in the politics of the Muslims. Suppose any party wanted to contest the election and win the election battle. They needed to get help from these Sufi. Even in most of the seats in the legislative assembly, twenty-seven out of thirty-four, were landowning landlords, most of whom were Pirs. Even the future of the Muslim League was in their hands (Muzaffar, Khan, & Karamat, 2017). Even under the Jinnah, the party's reorganization was in the hands of two pirs: GM Sayyad and Pir Ali Bakhsh Rashidi. The pirdom was even more vital in Punjab, and the British quickly ruled

Punjab with the alliance of these Pir. There were several factors due to which the bond was easy and robust. First, the British succeeded the Sikhs so the Muslims, especially the Pirs, welcomed their new masters wholeheartedly. Punjab has been the oldest and biggest home of Pir politics. The province is the home of small Suharwardi and Qadri shrines. (Aziz, 2001)

According to a survey conducted by Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, there are 598 shrines in Punjab, out of which sixty-four shrines have direct connections with politics. In Punjab, forty-two tehsils have at least one Sufi shrine. Multan has the most substantial number of shrines. Per the survey, 39 percent of shrines are situated in central Punjab. Also, shrines are not only a rural phenomenon either. Looking closely, we can see that the urban concentration of shrines is very high; in Lahore, there are 73 shrines, in Multan, 20 and Rawalpindi, 17. (MALIK & Malik, 2018).

When power politics are examined, only the macro level is considered. It solely highlights the function of the military, political elites, and the top three echelons of the bureaucracy. Studying the phenomenon of shrine politics is not useless. Since the shrines are a component of the religious elite, they have traditionally served society's elite. Toba Tek Singh district should be used as a sole case study since it offers excellent opportunities for examining the issue at the micro level. (Fareed, Muzaffar & Riaz, 2019). It is a remnant of the settlement colony established during British control, which projected shrines and Pirs for their purposes before division and claimed that the phenomena were still present here after 75 years of freedom. It is crucial to ascertain the shrine politics' origins, where they originated, and how they impact local democratization. After then, it will be allowed to choose how its influence extends to larger, macro-level national politics. More restricted information is accessible on shrines because there is a wealth of literature on colonial Punjab, and much more about Pakistani Punjab has been produced at the national level. There is a considerable difference between the two groups when focusing on local micro-level district study. Most of them are historical accounts or political culture-related writing.

In contrast, this research is crucial to comprehend how the shrine phenomenon maintains a dominant position in the political landscape at both the macro and micro levels, as well as what political dynamics are either fostering or enhancing the circumstance of shrine politics to make it less prevalent. As it is crucial in affecting voter behavior in elections, there is no study on "Pirs and Shrines politics" in this context.

Literature Review

The relationship between pirs and political issues is regularly satisfied by the immense land property, and these revelations vouch for the significance of the trade between extreme, grounded political power. Furthermore, we test the determinants of political choices and observe that raised areas viewed as all-around critical, reflected in their acknowledgment and backing from British trailblazer subject matter experts, unavoidably picked administrative issues in post-provincial Punjab. At the same time, line support for sacred destinations was critical to a deep-rooted custom of repaying special stepped area guards. The Land Alienation Act of 1900, which was imposed, caused "important alterations" to the property freedoms system while still under British authority. Common rule solidified the connection between Punjab's somber and country first class and prompted an enormous blend of the essential power structure. Despite the way that we are mindful so as not to ascribe a causal comprehension to these outcomes, it is both solid and unsurprising on essential genuine models. Proof, both emotional and quantitative, proposes substantial diligence in the political economy of spots of love.

Sufism can be described as strictly edifying Islamic mysticism. Sufis, the followers of Sufism, follow an immediate connection back to the Islamic teacher and messenger of Islam, Prophet Muhammad, by forming assemblies around an outstanding expert referred to as "wali." Sufi words are crucial in Persian and other related scripts such as Turkish, Sindhi, Urdu, Punjabi, and Pashto. They emphasized love and devotion to one God and rejected outward legalism, encouraging individuals to be sensitive to all individuals and heed the manifestations of God (Muzaffar, & Rafique, 2020). They rejected the love of icons and extensively used prayers (jamaat) to elaborate on rites of love. They accepted that the heart could be prepared to see the world differently by creating clarity, such as giving up common physical and mental cravings. They devised elaborate strategies of preparation or supplication by reciting a sacred recipe or name; called "zikr." Chanting and thinking are known as sama, Raqs (moving), the conversation of stories, and breath control, under the guidance of an expert or pir. Note: Sufism is more accommodating than Islam when invoking the One Lord Allah, as it has its fluid approaches to connecting with God, although there are a few advocated rules and commitments of love. Today Sufism is practiced in Egypt, Senegal, and Morocco.

Translations of Sufi-Sultan relations began in connection with some scholarly mediations in the 19th century. The first has emerged for some time to counter the disparagement of Muslim rule projected in obsessive, authoritarian tones in English-language narratives, starting with James Mill's *The History of British India* (Mill 1972), which has been republished for a previous analysis of Mill's writing. Look up Grewal 1970. Patriot historians traditionally singled out the spiritualists of Islam as role models who rejected this all-out onslaught on Muslims as an aggressive, cruel race before Mohammad Habib's detailed assessment of the borderline understanding of the sultanate's administrative activities. (M. Habib 1974). Attempts were made to connect the supernatural inspiration that led Sufis and Sufism with bhakti mysticism through the advocacy of history students like Tara (Chand 1922), which eventually earned well-known popularity among teachers like Kabir and Nanak. These historiographical mediations moved antiquarians' attention away from the more divisive and brutally problematic world of governmental affairs and toward issues like developing a benign composite culture. From the 1920s to the 1940s, there was widespread patronage, but there was also a corresponding spread of Hindu-Muslim communion qualifications, which closed in 1947 in the portion of the subcontinent in India and Pakistan. In this case, antiquarians also responded to governmental questions of the time. By helping their readers remember the standard foundations of Hindu and Muslim culture, patriotic history students attempted to counter what they believed to be pioneering practices in "Gap and Rule."

Dynamics of Pirs and Shrines Politics in Toba Tek Singh

The Toba Tek Singh district has varied dimensional characteristics of its geographic importance in the district of Punjab since it is in the center of the sandal bar. Self-growing forests surrounded this area, so the British government felt it was a constant threat. So, they planned to settle the city of Lyallpur for administrative purposes. Geographically, the south part is more fertile than the north part. The tribe that raised cattle was drawn to the area because the soil is appropriate for self-growing grass. Because of this, Sikh kings taxed cow grazing, creating a significant source of income. This region was one of the primary sources of camels, horses, and ponies for the British troops during the First World War. To ensure the continued availability of dairy products in the garrison colonies, they introduced a specific breed of seed and cattle. The region developed as a center for agriculture and became fruitful for army demands. The British dubbed this region "The Granary of Asia" because of the fertile soil there. British built an Agricultural College and Research Center in 1909, and in 1961 it became the University of Agriculture. (Akhtar, 2014)

In Toba Tek Singh, around 81% of its population is from rural areas, and only 19% is from urban areas. As per the 2017 census, the population of this whole district was approximately 2.2 million. Although the main population of this district is from rural areas, the literacy rate of this area is exceptionally increasing. According to the 1981 literacy report, the literacy rate of this district was 30.3%, which progressed to 50.5% in 1998, and in 2021 the literacy rate will be 70%. The literacy rate in the urban areas of this district is 63.2%, and the rural area literacy rate is 47.5%. Toba Tek Singh became a district on 1st July 1982. There are 4 Tehsils under this district, Toba Tek Singh, Kamalia, Gojra, and Pir Mahal; there are 539 villages under these tehsils.

Shrine and Pirs shaped local and national politics. Pirs were always represented in elections, but not all participated. Pirs rule various areas regardless of government. Due to Pirs' high voter turnout, no one Sayyad family member has won in Pir Mahal since 1937. Pir Syed Nasir ud Din Shah was elected NA 78&79 MNA in 1937. Makhdoom Nazar Hussain Shah was elected MNA in 1951. Also in 1985, Makhdoom Syed Ali Raza Shah was elected MNA from NA 78 and Syed Ibrar Hussain Shah of Sandhilianwali MPA from PP 88. Makhdoom Ali Raza Shah was PP 88's local MPA before becoming MNA. In 1988, 1990, 1993, 2002, 2008, and 2013, Makhdoom Ali Raza Shah remained MPA in the same area. He was succeeded by his daughter Syeda Sonia Ali Raza Shah as MPA in the 2018 general election. Sonia Ali Raza Shah ran against Sandhilianwali's Syed Qutab Ali Shah in 2018 (Election Commission of Pakistan). Although a Sandhilianwali devotee, the Darbar of Qadir Baksh has influence in the area. They constantly participated indirectly in politics. They have backed Kamalia MNA Riaz Fityana in recent elections. Syed Qutab Ali Shah of Sandhilianwali ran against Riaz Fityana in the 2013 general elections, causing conflict within the Darbars. The first time Riaz Fityana lost against PML(N) candidate Ch. Asad ur Rahman. Syed Qutab Ali Shah, a close relative of ex-PM Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani, ran for the Pakistan People's Party for the first time in 2013. Qutab Ali Shah later joined PML (N) and ran as MPA against PTI's Sonia Ali Raza Shah in 2018 (Election Commission of Pakistan). Pirs was represented in local elections. Sayyad won three seats in the 1983 local body elections, and Iftikhar Hussain Shah, Gias Mehmood Shah, and Akhtar Abbas Shah won District Council seats. Three District Council members were re-elected in 1987. Hussanat Mahmood Shah, Syed Javed Hussain, and Syed Haider Abbas Sherazi joined the district council in 1991. In 2001, Syed Mujeeb ul Hassan, Syed Hasnat Mehmood, Syed Akhtar Abbas Kirmani, Syed Khalid Mustafa, Syed Asad Abas, and Hassan Raza Shah were elected to the district council, increasing the seats to six. Pir Ahmad Shahzad, Syed Akhtar Abbas Kirmani, Syed Manzoor Abbas Shah, and Syed Ali Raza Shah were elected to the District Council again in 2005. (Zilla Council District Toba Tek Singh data).

Material and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence the political landscape. We adopted the snowball sampling technique to collect data through a combination of interviews and surveys. We conducted interviews with key informants, including Pirs, politicians, and local experts, to gain firsthand insights and perspectives on the impact of Pirs and shrines on the political landscape of District Toba Tek Singh. The collected qualitative data was then thematically analyzed to draw results and finding. This research approach ensured a comprehensive investigation of the relationship between the Pirs and political dynamics in the district Toba Tek Singh.

Results and Findings

The Pir and shrines dominate the political culture, and this phenomenon started centuries ago when Mughals used to rule the sub-continent. At that time, the Pir or Khankah was used to verify the ruler's authority. As stated by KK Aziz in Religion land and politics, the benefits of the Pirs and rulers were connected to each as the ruler needed to establish his authority over the people as people trusted pirs as their religious leaders. If a religious leader is dominant over the people's political decisions, then it is extremely easy for them to exploit their religious sentiments. As in the Mughal era, the Pirs needed the ruler's support in running their khankah, and the ruler needed Pirs to establish their rule and make people accept the decisions made by the rulers.

In contemporary times, the Pirs are doing the same to fulfill their political, social, or economic interests. This study collects data to analyze the dominance of these Pirs and shrines in society and how these Pirs and shrines influence people's social and political behavior in Punjab, especially in the Toba Tek Singh district.

Influence of Pirs and Shrines on Political Socialization

According to the survey and the data collected from the interview of existing politicians and Pirs of the area, the Pirs are very dominant in the rural line of Kamalia and Pir Mahal as the people's behavior in the urban side of Toba Tek Singh and Gojra have a dominant caste system politics. An important fact is that most of the dominant shrines are situated in the Kamalia and Pir Mahal regions, so they have many followers. As most of the population belongs to villages, there are around 540 villages in the Toba Tek Singh district. More than twenty shrines are situated in this region, including small, big, and influential shrines. People pay wheat or money when asked to contribute to Urs of the shrine. Many murids live at the shrines and offer their services to the Pirs for free. The Pirs influence the internal family systems of this area, as people come to Pirs to discuss their family and business matters.

These shrines also play a key role in society as a social institution. People from different castes and areas relate to other through this group. People in this area refer to this as "Pir Bhai." People socialize with different people from different areas on these shrines, and they have been told stories related to the Pirs and the connecting shrines that strengthened people's belief in shrines and Pirs.

The dominance of Pir and Shrine in Political Culture

The political culture of district Toba Tek Singh is remarkably diverse. People have their priorities in the elections and during the electoral process. In the social setup of Toba Tek Singh, it has been observed that the caste system is extraordinarily strong. People act as a whole in the form of a community, and people's behavior changes according to their community. As there is a small shrine in the region of Kamalia, Darbar Baba Hundal, it is an exceedingly small darbar associated with a village. In that village, people from the same caste have a greater number, and according to the people, the Darbar is owned by the village, so in the last elections, the narrative of the people was that anyone who would provide electricity upto the Darbar Baba Hundal, they will support that person in the elections.

Most of the Pirs is followed by the entire community, where the people are collective Murid of one Pir or different Pirs from Shrines. They consider Pirs their spiritual leader and follow pirs in every capacity as they consider this a matter of faith. Pir Mahal is

the main area of this district where the Pir dominance is at its peak. It can be observed through the past election results that no one could compete with the Sayyads of this area. The people of the Pir Mahal region were confused about whom they should vote for during the past elections because both strong applicants were from the Sayyad family, and one of the Sayyad is the descendent of one of the strongest shrines in Pakistan.

From the cultural perspective, the Pirs are close to the people as they interact with them in such a way that they discuss their problems with the Pirs. The Pirs are in easy access to the people when it comes to visiting shrines.

When the Pirs are so close to the people and have a great following, this helps Pirs establish their dominance in the region and influence people's political decisions. According to some politicians and local workers, Pirs often negotiate with the politicians that if they want their support, they need to facilitate them in terms of financial assistance. Some politicians refer to the blackmailing of the Pirs as the Pirs properly asking politicians for money in exchange for their blessings in the elections.

Transformation of social and voting behavior of the people

The literacy rate of this region is getting better. With increasing educational facilities and proper political awareness, this concept of shrines is transforming although the process is slow, it is happening. Furthermore, in this age of networks and social media, where the world is in your hands, you can watch and know everything. Now people understand that the politicians are their representatives, not the pirs, because, in the end, they must come to politicians for their problems. The process is slow, but it is happening that people start understanding the basics of things. The people are getting more awareness regarding the political behavior of the country. The important factor is that the people do understand that at the end of the day, they need to go to the politicians for their affairs, and if they vote under the influence of the Pirs and Shrines, the politicians will not help in their affairs and they will ask them to go to Pirs where they need to follow the protocol of the Pir to meet him.

Discussion

Shrine politics is not a very new term for urban and rural areas of Pakistan. In Punjab and Sindh, the Pirs and shrines dominate the local and national power politics. It is not that they are outstanding political leaders, but they have a significant following who vote for them. This vote casting can be a political influence on the person. However, most of the time, this process is being manipulated by the Pirs and Shrines when they influence people based on their religious sentiments. People cast a vote for people under the influence of the shrines' following within their family, and most of the time, they do not have the other option where they can elect somebody outside the shrines' family.

The pir who is showing dominance in the area is not because he is a landowning feudal lord, but he has connections across the country with the other shrines like a network. In his book *Pir and politics*, KK Aziz traced the factors and processes through which all the Pirs are connected. They are the religious and spiritual leaders of the people, so they influence people through the religious side. While conducting this research, people from the rural belt of Toba Tek Singh have an opinion that the Pirs are being followed on a considerable level, and people considered voting for Pirs not political but religious.

I have taken District Toba Tek Singh because in this district, not only do the local Pirs dominate the people, but some shrines from the cities directly influence this region. In

this study. Not all the Pirs participate in the elections, but some influence indirectly by supporting the politicians in the local and general elections. There are two examples in this region. Darbar of Sandhilianwali is a well-known shrine in the area; previously, they have been influencing the politics indirectly by supporting the Riaz Fityana in Kamalia and Makhdoom Ali Raza for an exceptionally long time Shah in Pir Mahal. The descendent of this shrine Syed Qutab Ali Shah is a close relative of Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani.

So Qutab Ali Shah participated in the elections for the first time in the 2013 General elections, when he contested elections on the ticket of PPP. Although it was the first time for Syed Qutab Ali Shah, he got 66372 votes as MNA, and Riaz Fityana, the sitting MNA of the Kamalia, got 66960 votes. Moreover, due to this splitting of votes, Ch. Asad-ur-Rahman won the election with 103581 votes in the area after an extraordinarily long time. Now, if we look at the numbers due to the separation of Riaz Fityana from Syed Qutab Ali Shah, Riaz Fityana lost around half of its vote count due to the influence of Qutab Ali Shah. Right after the 2013 elections, Qutab Ali Shah joined PML N, and as a result, Riaz Fityana got 129506 votes in Kamalia; meanwhile, the vote count of Asad-ur-Rahman was almost identical in both elections. Qutab Ali Shah got the vote not due to the PPP supporters in the elections but because of his influence and following. (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2013)

In the general elections of 2018, in the Pir Mahal region for the MPA seat, there were eighteen candidates, out of which six were from shrine families. Qutab Ali Shah contested the election on the ticket of PML N against Syeda Sonia Ali Raza (Daughter of Ali Raza Shah, who held that seat from 1977 to 2013 till his death). Due to the same influence and following, the competition was very tough. Qutab Ali Shah got 53122 votes, and Sonia Ali Raza got 53105. (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2018)

That was an example of the direct influence of shrines in the region. However, other shrine families have a significant following in the area but do not participate in the election process directly; instead, they prefer to support politicians indirectly. According to one of the politicians and sitting parliamentarian, they are bound to get support from the shrines because, no matter how strong allies you have in your constituency, the people do follow their Pirs and Shrines. They even say they will not give you a vote until our Pir asks them to do so. According to another Parliamentarian, the Pirs blackmail politicians during elections to fulfill their financial needs; he stated that the Pir would follow whoever gives them more money. They even asked politicians to pay for their expenses; otherwise, they would not support them.

Now the people are getting awareness as after giving the vote to a Pir when they go to Pir for any purpose, they need to follow the protocol of the shrine. They cannot meet Pir any time directly, as they meet politicians. Furthermore, the politician who paid Pir to get a vote does not listen to the people. So, people know that to fulfill their needs and development, they need to eliminate this phenomenon. That showed in the last election result when people voted for Riaz Fityana instead of Asad-ur-Rahman, although Asad-ur-Rahman has the support of Qutab Ali Shah.

Conclusion

The stance regarding the shrines has been mostly consistent, although each regime has its core symbols and has incorporated Islam in many ways. The prominence of the saints' changes from one government to the next, reflecting these variances.

Sufi shrines are highly revered in Pakistani culture, particularly in Toba Tek Singh. The shrines are significant sites to the followers, who carry out various rites there. Sufis have always been seen as guides who direct people toward God's will and success. The data for the current study came from nineteen in-depth interviews conducted just at Sayed Shrine in Toba Tek Singh, using a qualitative research approach. The study's conclusions showed that most people have high faith in the benefits of shrines with their Pirs and frequently go to shrines to meet their societal, financial, psychological, and spiritual aspects. They had faith that the deceased pirs of the shrine could speak to, listen to, and assist them in many ways. However, some had a different opinion. They regarded the shrine's Pirs as upright people but disapproved of their function as a go-between for humans and Allah. Although attitudes toward myths and superstitions differed according to gender and educational attainment, most tourists did not hold such beliefs.

Although Shrines have had a significant impact on Religion in Toba Tek Singh and most Muslims there identify as pirs, neither their patronage nor their clients' allegiance to them has provided a solid basis for unsubtle political action in the region. Paradoxically, Pakistani shrines are closely related to regional and local political structures. The study looked at the intricate connection between Shrines and Pirs' impacts and political participation in Pakistan in the 20th and 21st centuries. Shrines and Pirs have given rise to a secular humanist political approach that has materialized in several locales, from the said shrines, even though local religious authorities had found themselves enormously benefited, politically and monetarily, by such traditions. In contrast, during the past 20 years, pirs Muslims have seen increased civic engagement and involvement in response to the pressure from extremists.

Recommendations

- Religion and culture shall be separated from the Politics of Pakistan, especially when considering regional or local politics.
- Reforming political participation at the local level.
- Ensuring fair and free elections in districts with transparency and non-interference of provincial or national politicians.
- People shall be given information about elections and the effects on politics of their voting contribution through voting.
- More in-depth studies shall be conducted in other districts of Pakistan to evaluate the intensity of the problem.

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