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Shrines as Living Centers of Faith: The Religious Significance of Shrines in Contemporary Kashmiri Society

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Abstract

Shrines occupy a distinctive position in the religious and cultural landscape of Kashmir. Although the classical *khanqah* was primarily a centre of Sufi instruction, spiritual discipline and fellowship, many contemporary Kashmiri shrines have inherited and transformed several of these functions. This paper examines the continuing religious significance of shrines as active centres of worship, devotional recitation, moral instruction and religious transmission. Drawing upon observations of major shrines including Khanqah-i-Maula, Dargah Hazratbal, Tsar-i-Sharif, Dastgir Sahib, Naqshband Sahib and Aishmuqam, it argues that shrines cannot adequately be understood merely as funerary monuments. Their mosques, congregational spaces, religious gatherings, recitations and devotional practices make them important institutions of lived religion. Quranic recitation, *durud*, *n'at*, *manqabat*, *munajat*, *awrad*, *khatmat*, sermons and collective *zikr* provide opportunities for religious participation among both literate and non-literate sections of society. Despite debates surrounding shrine practices, these sites continue to preserve important dimensions of Kashmiri Muslim devotional culture and connect contemporary believers with a long historical tradition of Sufism.

Introduction

A shrine is a sacred place associated with a venerated religious personality, most commonly a Sufi saint in the Kashmiri context. Usually built around the grave of the saint, the shrine becomes a place of visitation, prayer, remembrance and communal religious activity. Kashmir possesses an exceptionally rich landscape of sacred sites. Kalhana's observation that there was scarcely a space in Kashmir without a *tirtha* illustrates the historical importance of sacred geography in the Valley. With the gradual establishment of Islam, this sacred landscape was not simply erased; rather, new Islamic institutions and sacred centres emerged within it.

The spread of Islam in Kashmir was closely connected with Sufi personalities and institutions. The *khanqah* became an important centre of spiritual instruction, while the tombs of prominent Sufis subsequently developed into shrines. Over generations, these places acquired religious, social and cultural significance extending beyond the grave itself.

The present paper focuses specifically on the **religious functions of shrines in contemporary Kashmiri society**. It does not attempt to resolve theological debates concerning shrine visitation,

intercession or associated devotional practices. Instead, it examines the empirical religious activities that take place at shrines and asks why these institutions continue to attract devotees. The argument is that contemporary shrines function as **living centres of faith**, where religious traditions are performed, transmitted and experienced collectively.

From Khanqah to Shrine: An Institutional Transformation

The distinction between a *khanqah* and a shrine is essential. Historically, the *khanqah* was a centre of Sufi spiritual life. It could accommodate disciples, visitors and Sufis, and provided an environment for instruction, meditation, *zikr* and communal religious life. The institution was often associated with a particular Sufi order and spiritual lineage.

A shrine, by contrast, generally developed around the burial place of a deceased saint. In Kashmir, however, the distinction was never absolute. In several instances, the saint was buried within or near the *khanqah*, resulting in the gradual transformation of the institution into a shrine complex. The sacred memory of the saint became attached to the physical space.

Khanqah-e-Mu'ala in Srinagar provides an important example. Associated with Sayyid Ali Hamadani in the wider history of Kashmir's Islamic sacred landscape and, more broadly, with the tradition of Sufi institutions in Srinagar, the Khanqah represents the historical importance of the *khanqah* as an architectural and devotional institution. Similarly, **Tsar-i-Sharif**, associated with Sheikh Nuruddin Rishi, demonstrates how the memory of a major spiritual personality became institutionalised around a sacred site.

In contemporary Kashmir, most shrines no longer operate as residential Sufi convents in the classical sense. Nevertheless, many retain the religious functions historically associated with the *khanqah*: prayer, Quranic recitation, remembrance of God, religious instruction and communal devotion. The institution has therefore changed in form without becoming religiously irrelevant.

Shrines as Centres of Congregational Worship

One of the most visible religious functions of Kashmiri shrines is their connection with congregational prayer. Major shrine complexes commonly contain or are associated with mosques. This architectural relationship is significant because it places the tomb within a wider religious environment rather than treating it as an isolated funerary structure.

Dargah Hazratbal in Srinagar offers a particularly prominent example. Associated with the sacred relic of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, the Dargah is simultaneously a shrine, a major mosque complex and a place of large-scale congregational worship. The Friday prayer and major religious occasions draw large numbers of worshippers. The religious significance of Hazratbal therefore extends well beyond the physical relic. The mosque, sermons, Quranic recitation and collective supplication make it an important institution of public religious life.

Likewise, **Dastgir Sahib shrine at Khanyar, Srinagar**, associated with Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani, functions as a place of prayer and devotional gathering. Its religious importance is reinforced by the regular presence of worshippers and by collective practices of remembrance and supplication.

The mosque attached to the shrine complex also demonstrates the practical relationship between shrine devotion and mainstream Islamic worship. The devotee may enter the complex to offer

prayer, participate in recitation, listen to religious discourse and visit the sacred tomb. Thus, several forms of religious activity coexist within the same sacred space.

Collective Zikr and Devotional Recitation

The most distinctive religious feature of many Kashmiri shrines is the performance of collective devotional practices. These include Quranic recitation, *durud*, *n'at*, *manqabat*, *munajat*, *awrad* and various forms of *khatmat* and *zikr*.

Durud expresses blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, while *n'at* consists of devotional poetry in praise of the Prophet. *Manqabat* praises saints and spiritual personalities, whereas *munajat* takes the form of intimate supplication to God. *Awrad* refers to prescribed or customary devotional recitations, and *khatmat* may involve collective recitation and remembrance conducted for particular religious occasions or spiritual purposes.

These practices are especially visible on Fridays, during the month of Ramadan, on occasions associated with particular Sufis, and during 'urs celebrations. The atmosphere of collective recitation creates a distinctive form of religious participation. Religion is not merely read privately but heard, repeated and experienced collectively.

This has an important educational dimension. In communities where access to formal religious education has historically been uneven, oral repetition has enabled people to memorise prayers, Quranic verses. The shrine therefore functions as an informal space of religious pedagogy.

The importance of oral transmission should not be underestimated. A person who may not possess extensive formal education can nevertheless participate meaningfully in *durud*, *zikr* and devotional recitations. Through repeated participation, religious vocabulary, ethical teachings and sacred narratives become embedded in collective memory.

Sermons, Religious Instruction and Moral Formation

Shrines also function as centres of religious instruction. Sermons and discourses delivered during important gatherings commonly address questions of faith, morality, spirituality and social conduct. The lives of saints are narrated not merely as historical biographies but as examples of piety, humility, generosity, patience and service.

The religious personality associated with a shrine consequently becomes a moral exemplar. At **Tsar-i-Sharif**, the memory of Sheikh Nur-ud-din Rishi is associated with an indigenous Kashmiri tradition of spirituality, ethical teaching and devotional culture. His teachings have historically contributed to the formation of a distinctive Kashmiri religious consciousness.

Similarly, the devotional memory associated with **Dastgir Sahib** connects local worshippers with the wider Qadiri Sufi tradition. The shrine thus becomes a point at which a local religious community encounters a broader Islamic spiritual heritage.

At **Aishmuqam**, associated with Baba Zain-ud-din, the sacred site similarly combines pilgrimage, prayer and the remembrance of a Sufi personality. Such shrines preserve not only the memory of individuals but also the religious ideals attributed to them.

The sermon, therefore, serves two purposes: it interprets religious teachings for contemporary audiences and connects those teachings to the exemplary lives of earlier spiritual figures.

Shrines, Libraries and Religious Infrastructure

Another significant aspect of contemporary shrines is their contribution to religious infrastructure. Donations and offerings associated with shrine complexes can support the maintenance of mosques, religious buildings, educational facilities and libraries.

A shrine with a mosque and library becomes more than a destination for occasional pilgrimage. It becomes a continuing religious institution. Visitors may pray, read religious literature, attend sermons, participate in recitation or simply spend time within a sacred environment.

This institutional dimension is particularly important because it explains why shrines remain relevant even outside major festivals or 'urs occasions. Their religious life is continuous rather than episodic.

The mosque-shrine relationship is especially evident at major centres such as Hazratbal. Its large congregational facilities enable the shrine to serve simultaneously as a place of pilgrimage and ordinary Muslim worship.

Major Shrines and the Religious Geography of Kashmir

The religious significance of Kashmiri shrines becomes clearer when individual examples are considered.

Dargah Hazratbal occupies a unique position because of its association with the sacred relic attributed to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. It attracts devotees from across Kashmir and beyond and serves as a major centre of congregational prayer and religious gatherings.

Khanqah-e-Mu'ala, one of Srinagar's most important historic Islamic monuments, represents the enduring legacy of Sufi institutional culture. Its architectural and devotional significance links contemporary Kashmir with the early centuries of Muslim religious establishment in the Valley.

Tsar-i-Sharif represents the spiritual legacy of Sheikh Nur-ud-din Rishi and the Rishi-Sufi tradition. The site continues to function as a place of prayer, visitation and remembrance.

Dastgir Sahib represents the Qadiri order devotional tradition and remains an important religious centre in Srinagar. Collective prayer and devotional practices contribute to its continuing vitality.

Naqshband Sahib shrine, associated with the Naqshbandi tradition and Khwaja Khawas Naqshband, represents another dimension of Kashmir's Sufi heritage. The shrine illustrates the presence of multiple Sufi lineages within Kashmiri religious culture.

Aishmuqam, associated with Baba Zain-ud-din, provides another example of the relationship between Sufi memory, pilgrimage and local religious practice.

Taken together, these shrines demonstrate that Kashmir's sacred geography is not centred upon a single Sufi tradition. Rather, it represents a network of spiritual lineages and devotional practices.

Continuity and Transformation

The contemporary shrine is neither identical to the medieval *khanqah* nor merely a monument to the deceased. It represents an evolving religious institution. Its functions have changed in response to social transformation, modern education, administrative regulation and changing patterns of religious authority.

Yet important continuities remain. Collective worship, remembrance, devotional recitation, moral instruction and reverence for spiritual personalities continue to connect present-day worshippers with earlier generations.

The shrine therefore illustrates the concept of **lived religion** particularly well. Religious traditions are not preserved solely in theological texts. They survive through repeated practices, sounds, memories, rituals and shared spaces. The shrine provides precisely such a space.

Conclusion

Shrines remain significant religious institutions in contemporary Kashmiri society. Although the classical *khanqah* and the modern shrine differ institutionally, the latter has preserved several important functions associated with the former. Major shrines such as Dargah Hazratbal, Khanqah-i-Mu'ala, Tsar-i-Sharif, Dastgir Sahib, Naqshband Sahib and Aishmuqam continue to provide spaces for prayer, Quranic recitation, *durud*, *na't*, *manqabat*, *munajat*, *awrad*, *khatmat*, sermons and collective *zikr*.

Their significance lies not simply in the presence of a Sufi's tomb or sacred relic but in the religious activities that continue around it. The mosque, library, sermon, recitation and congregational gathering transform the shrine into a living religious environment.

The empirical evidence therefore suggests that shrines should be studied as institutions of **lived Kashmiri Islam** rather than merely as monuments of the past. They preserve devotional practices, facilitate religious participation, transmit moral values and connect successive generations with the spiritual history of Kashmir. Whatever the debates surrounding particular shrine practices, their continuing presence demonstrates that the religious landscape of Kashmir remains deeply shaped by sacred memory, Sufi traditions and collective devotional life.

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