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Sacred Sociality: Sufi Shrines and Community Cohesion in Contemporary Kashmir

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Abstract

This paper examines the social role of Muslim shrines in Kashmir and argues that their significance extends beyond religious devotion. Shrines have historically functioned as institutions of community interaction, charitable assistance, moral guidance and social mediation. Drawing on historical literature and field observations of major shrine complexes, including Hazratbal, Khanqah-I-Mu'ala, Dastagir Sahib, Makhdoom Sahib and Chrar-i-Sharief, the paper explores the ways in which shrines facilitate social interaction and sustain networks of mutual assistance. Their courtyards and associated institutions provide spaces for collective gatherings, while *langar*, charity and *nazr-o-niyaz* contribute to informal welfare. The moral authority associated with Sufi and custodial institutions has also enabled forms of informal mediation and reconciliation. Shrines have additionally contributed to the preservation of shared cultural memories and, in particular historical contexts, facilitated interaction across religious communities. The paper concludes that shrines constitute an important form of social infrastructure in Kashmir, linking religious belief with community life, welfare and social cohesion.

Keywords: Kashmir; shrines; social institutions; social cohesion; community; mediation; welfare; langar; Sufism; Kashmiriyat

1. Introduction

The social significance of shrines in Kashmir extends considerably beyond the act of visiting a Sufi's tomb. For generations, shrines have served as places where people gather, seek guidance, exchange information, offer assistance and participate in collective activities. Their importance is therefore not confined to the domain of religious belief. They form part of the social infrastructure through which communities organise relationships and respond to everyday needs. The historical development of Sufi institutions in Kashmir contributed to this wider social function. *Khanqahs* were not merely places of spiritual instruction; they could also provide accommodation to travellers, assistance to the poor, spaces for learning and opportunities for interaction between different sections of society. With the transformation of many *khanqahs* into shrine complexes, several of these social functions survived in modified forms.

Major shrines such as Hazratbal, Khanqah-e-Mu'ala, Dastgir Sahib, Makhdoom Sahib and Chrar-i-Sharif continue to attract large numbers of people for religious observances,

commemorations and everyday visits. Their social importance becomes particularly visible during *urs*, religious festivals, periods of hardship and occasions requiring collective assistance. This paper examines four principal dimensions of this social role: **community formation, informal mediation, welfare and charity, and social cohesion**. It argues that shrines should be understood as active social institutions whose authority rests largely upon accessibility, inherited tradition and public trust.

2. Shrines as Community Spaces

One of the most visible social functions of a shrine is its capacity to bring people together. A major shrine generally includes not only the tomb but also a mosque, courtyard, pathways, accommodation, charitable facilities and, in many cases, commercial activity in the surrounding area. These spaces facilitate interaction among people who may otherwise have limited opportunities for social contact.

The shrine courtyard can function as an informal public space. Visitors come to pray, recite the Qur'an, meet relatives, seek spiritual counsel or simply participate in the social life surrounding the institution. Such interaction is particularly significant in older urban neighbourhoods, where shrines form part of the historical structure of the settlement.

The social character of shrine gatherings becomes especially pronounced during *urs*. The commemoration of a saint's death anniversary attracts devotees from surrounding villages, towns and, in some cases, from outside the Valley. Families and acquaintances meet, local associations become active, and temporary arrangements are established for food distribution, accommodation and crowd management.

The shrine consequently becomes a site where **religious participation and social interaction overlap**. Its significance lies not simply in the number of visitors but in the relationships created and renewed through repeated participation.

3. Shrines and Life-Cycle and Community Practices

Shrines have also been incorporated into aspects of community life associated with important personal and family occasions. Practices vary from one locality to another, and not every shrine is associated with the same customs. Nevertheless, visits to revered Sufi shrines may accompany vows, prayers for wellbeing, thanksgiving and other significant moments.

The fulfilment of a pledge, for example, may involve the distribution of food or *tabarruk* among other devotees. Such practices transform an individual religious experience into a community act of sharing.

The social importance of these practices lies in their capacity to connect individual concerns with collective participation. A family's prayer for recovery from illness, a thanksgiving following the fulfilment of a wish, or the distribution of food at a shrine creates an occasion for interaction and reciprocity.

Shrines can thus provide a framework through which personal experiences are incorporated into community life. The individual does not approach the sacred entirely in isolation but often participates within a wider network of family, neighbours and fellow devotees.

4. Moral Authority

An important historical dimension of Sufi institutions was their moral authority. The *pir*, *sajjada nashin* or other recognised religious figures could command considerable respect within the community. This authority occasionally extended beyond strictly religious matters into social relationships.

In the absence of easily accessible formal mechanisms of dispute resolution, respected religious figures could act as mediators in disagreements involving families, neighbours or members of a local community. Such mediation should not be equated with a formal judicial process. Rather, it represented a culturally embedded mechanism through which disputing parties could seek reconciliation.

The effectiveness of such mediation depended largely upon the moral standing of the individual involved. A party agreeing to mediation at a shrine was not necessarily accepting a legally binding judgement; instead, the process could appeal to religious conscience, family honour and community expectations.

This distinction is important for understanding the contemporary role of shrines. Modern courts and administrative institutions have assumed formal responsibility for dispute resolution. Nevertheless, religious leaders and shrine custodians may continue to provide advice, facilitate reconciliation or encourage disputing parties to resolve matters peacefully.

The shrine therefore represents a form of **moral rather than coercive authority**. Its influence derives from the reputation of the Sufi, the sanctity attributed to the site and the community's confidence in the institution.

5. Shrines as Sites of Informal Counselling

The social role of shrines also includes forms of informal counselling. Individuals experiencing bereavement, anxiety, family difficulties or personal uncertainty may approach religious figures or shrine custodians for *dua*, advice and reassurance.

Such encounters should not be confused with professional psychological counselling. Nevertheless, they perform an important social function by providing individuals with a trusted setting in which they can articulate their concerns.

The accessibility of shrines is significant in this respect. Unlike specialised professional services, which may be geographically or economically inaccessible to some sections of society, shrine institutions are generally familiar and socially embedded. Individuals may approach them without formal appointments or institutional procedures.

This does not mean that shrine-based guidance can replace professional legal, medical or psychological services. Rather, it demonstrates how religious institutions can operate as **first**

points of social support, particularly in communities where informal networks remain important.

6. Charity, Community Kitchen and Social Welfare

The charitable function of shrines represents perhaps their most tangible contribution to social welfare. Donations, *nazr-o-niyaz* and other offerings may support the maintenance of religious institutions and, depending upon the particular shrine and its administrative arrangements, contribute to charitable activities.

Food distribution occupies a particularly visible place in this tradition. *Langar* or public kitchen and other forms of food distribution can provide meals to visitors, travellers and people in need. During major religious gatherings, food preparation and distribution may involve substantial voluntary participation.

The social significance of such activities extends beyond the provision of food. Preparing and distributing meals creates opportunities for collective service. Volunteers, cooks, administrators and donors become part of a shared activity.

Charitable assistance may also take other forms, including contributions towards educational expenses, medical needs, funerals or assistance to particularly vulnerable individuals. The precise nature and scale of such assistance varies considerably between shrine institutions and should therefore be documented through individual case studies rather than generalised across all shrines.

Nonetheless, the broader principle is clear: **the shrine provides an institutional channel through which religious giving can acquire a social dimension.**

7. Shrines and Social Capital

The concept of social capital is useful in analysing these functions. Social capital refers broadly to networks, relationships, trust and norms of reciprocity that facilitate collective action.

Shrines can generate such social capital because participation is repeated and community-based. Individuals encounter the same volunteers, custodians, neighbours, vendors and religious figures over time. These repeated interactions can create familiarity and trust.

The *urs* provides an especially clear example. Organising a large gathering requires cooperation between religious authorities, local residents, volunteers, administrators, food distributors, transport providers and other participants. The event therefore depends upon networks of social cooperation.

The shrine can consequently function as a **node connecting otherwise separate social networks**. Rural and urban visitors, families from different localities, religious scholars, artisans and ordinary devotees may interact within the same institutional space.

Such networks become particularly valuable during periods of crisis, when established relationships can facilitate the rapid mobilisation of assistance.

8. Shrines and Inter-Community Relations

The relationship between shrines and inter-community interaction requires careful historical treatment. The term *Kashmiriyat* is frequently used to describe Kashmir's traditions of shared cultural belonging and coexistence. Sufi and Rishi traditions have often occupied an important place in narratives of this shared heritage.

Historical scholarship has documented interactions between Muslim and Kashmiri Pandit communities around certain sacred sites and religious traditions. Figures associated with the Rishi tradition, particularly Sheikh Nuruddin, occupy an important place in the shared cultural memory of Kashmir.

However, it would be historically inaccurate to suggest that all shrines functioned uniformly as inter-religious spaces or that communal boundaries disappeared within them. Patterns of visitation varied according to locality, period and individual shrine.

The more defensible argument is that certain shrines and Sufi traditions provided **cultural vocabularies through which communities could recognise shared ethical and spiritual values**. The emphasis on compassion, humility, service and respect for the sacred created points of cultural contact.

Shrines therefore form an important part of the history of Kashmir's shared cultural landscape, while their role should be examined through specific historical and ethnographic evidence rather than through romanticised generalisations.

9. Gender and Accessibility

The social role of shrines must also be considered in relation to gender. Shrine spaces have historically provided opportunities for women to participate in forms of devotional and social activity, although patterns of access and participation vary substantially between locations and communities.

Women may visit shrines to pray, participate in religious gatherings, distribute food or accompany family members. In some places, women have established their own patterns of devotional participation and informal networking.

At the same time, shrine spaces are not necessarily free from the gender norms that structure wider Kashmiri society. Access to particular areas, participation in certain rituals and interaction with custodial authorities may differ according to local custom.

A balanced analysis therefore recognises both dimensions: shrines can provide significant spaces for women's religious and social participation, but they do not automatically eliminate existing gender hierarchies.

10. Shrines and Contemporary Social Change

The social functions of shrines have changed alongside Kashmiri society. Modern education, digital communication, formal welfare institutions, courts, hospitals and voluntary organisations have assumed many responsibilities previously associated with informal religious networks.

Nevertheless, shrines continue to possess an important advantage: **social trust accumulated over generations.**

For many communities, the shrine remains familiar, accessible and geographically central. Its institutional identity is rooted in local history, while its social activities depend upon participation by ordinary people.

At the same time, shrine institutions face challenges. Commercialisation, overcrowding, inadequate conservation, changing patterns of religious practice and tensions surrounding the management of donations and property can affect their social credibility.

The future social role of shrines will therefore depend partly upon transparent administration, responsible conservation



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