

Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, Sufi Sehwan shrine blast and Pakistan's pluralistic history

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There is a legend told through oral tradition in the sub-continent. There was a man who appeared before a great city, a wanderer seeking refuge in a new land.

When the king found out about this person, he refused to allow him in. He sent this person a pot of milk, and with it a message saying, "See this pot filled to the brim with milk, this is how we are. We have no room for you in our city."

The man, smiled and placed a flower on the pot of milk, and sent back a message to the king, "I want to live among you like this flower floats on milk, to spread the fragrance of love." And so it is said that this man was Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and the place Sehwan Sharif.

A testament to love and tolerance

Part of a fresh wave of terror attacks occurring in Pakistan [1], the February 16 suicide bomb blast on Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine in Sehwan killed at least 88 [2], including women and children. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) claimed responsibility for this attack - the deadliest in Pakistan since 2014 [3].

Given that there has been very little if not any at all media coverage in the West of this attack and of Muslims killed by ISIL, it is high time to get acquainted with and revisit Pakistan's rich history, cultural heritage and pluralism, delve into who and what was actually attacked here.

Lal Shahbaz Qalandar was a Sufi saint, philosopher, poet who preached love and tolerance for people of all religions, regardless of ethnicity, creed, gender or caste.

His life was a testament of these words from the 13th-century Sufi poet Rumi: The mosque that is built in the hearts of the saints is the place of worship for all, for God dwells there.

Thousands of devotees from across the country - from all religious backgrounds - Sunni, Shia, Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Parsi come to pay homage to Qalandar's shrine every Thursday and participate in dhamaal - ecstatic devotional dance.

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Qalandar's urs, or death anniversary celebration, brings more than half a million pilgrims to the

shrine from all over Pakistan.

What makes this site unique from any other shrines or mosques is that no devotee is compartmentalised into any particular religion. There are no labels. It is a space where different religious identities are embraced.

This is a side of Pakistan that the global media would not cover, as it often portrays only a relatively fanatic, narrow version of religion in Pakistan, inspired by violent fundamentalist groups, incognizant of a Sufi mystical dimension that is bound neither by space nor time.

In fact, the spread of Islam in the subcontinent was not because of the invasion of Muslim armies - it was primarily owing to the tremendous influence of the mystics of Islam - the tolerant and pluralistic spirit of the Sufis.

The fanaticism that Pakistan is witnessing today is nowhere near the ancient spiritual attitudes and tolerant sentiments of the land. Its pluralistic history is being lost with each and every terror attack.

The attack on Lal Shahbaz Qalandar has once again demonstrated that the militants consider pluralistic Islam - peaceful co-existence and mutual tolerance - a threat to their own worldview and version of Islam.

This is an attack on a Pakistan where the diversity of its citizens is the fabric of the society and history, where people are not bound by the confines of religious boundaries. It is a futile attempt to intimidate the masses and spread fear.

It does not help that the new United States administration reinforces an Islam vs the West mentality.

It is not fair that Islamophobes have no knowledge and are unaware that a spiritual tradition of acceptance is under attack.



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With no accountability from the government, no clear signs of the National Action Plan being implemented [4], Pakistan is losing once again to senseless terror.

Previous US administrations have had a clear foreign policy on South Asia, or at least repeatedly condemned these kinds of attacks in the region, to contribute to a sense of global understanding and participation - if even temporarily.

With no coverage in media or condemnation from political leadership on this barbarous attack in Sehwan, it is clear that effective foreign policy towards this region is very low on the agenda of the

current leadership.

This type of negligence will lead the US to further isolation in this part of the world and throw it years back on relationship building with the region.

In a space that has already been shrinking for minorities, a space where blood is being shed in streets, markets, schools, holy sites - this is not the pluralism that Pakistan once embodied in its identity, nor reminiscent of Pakistan's diverse and spiritually charged roots that go back thousands of years.

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<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/02/lal-shahbaz-qalandar-pakistan-pluralistic-history-170218112828742.html>

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* The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/pakistan-powerful-bomb-blast-rocks-lahore-17021313330696.html>

[2] <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/blast-hits-pakistan-lal-shahbaz-qalandar-sufi-shrine-170216144747128.html>

[3] <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2014/12/fighters-attack-army-run-school-pakistan-20141216742794184.html>

[4] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/01/peshawar-massacre-sparks-policy-shifts-p>

akistan-2015116173653607371.html